

No. 4

ZANE GREY'S *WESTERN*

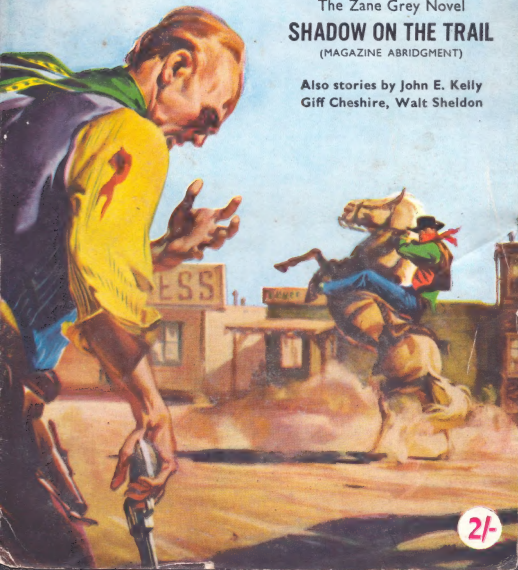
MAGAZINE

The Zane Grey Novel

SHADOW ON THE TRAIL

(MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

Also stories by John E. Kelly
Giff Cheshire, Walt Sheldon



2/-

"Get up, if you've got a gun!"

Shadow on the Trail





ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 1, No. 4—October, 1952

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Published in the United Kingdom by World Distributors (Manchester) Ltd., by arrangement with Western Printing & Lithographing Corporation, Racine, Wisconsin, U.S.A., authorised Zane Grey Western Magazine Publishers. Printed in Great Britain at the Philips Park Press by C. Nicholls & Company Ltd.

This Month's Magazine Abridgment

WADE HOLDEN, ace gunman and trusted lieutenant of Simm Bell, grizzled chief of the Southwest's most notorious gang of train robbers and holdup men, is set to stay by his doomed leader as the Texas Rangers close in to write a bloody finish to his last desperate stand. But, trapped through the treachery of one of his own men and knowing that he now faces the fate he always foresaw for himself, Simm Bell whispers a few well-nigh incredible words that send Wade Holden, dazed and wondering, plunging away into the dark—and into a life of endless hiding and distasteful make-believe. Hard-pressed by the pursuing Rangers, Wade stumbles, wounded, into an emigrant camp, where he finds unexpected sanctuary in the tent of a beautiful girl. Later on he takes his leave, believing that he will never see her again, although his destiny is inextricably bound up with this girl's.

Eluding pursuit, Holden reaches New Mexico, where for a time he rides for one of the outfits involved in the grim Lincoln County War. After long years of lone-wolf wanderings, his sympathy is stirred by the tribulations of a rancher named Pencarrow, whose once-prosperous spread is gradually being reduced to wrack and ruin by the unending depredations of ruthless cattle thieves. Hiring out his gun to Pencarrow, Holden discovers that the rancher's daughter is the same girl who befriended him in the pioneer camp years before. From then on all of Wade Holden's waking hours are devoted to the cause of the Pencarrows. Jacqueline Pencarrow learns to love the stern-faced man who has befriended them, but "Tex Brandon," as Holden is now known, feels that his outlaw past prevents him from returning her affections. Still, loyal to his iron, Wade Holden faces up to one gun test after another in single-minded dedication to the welfare of this girl and her family. But not until the last challenge has been flung and the last savage battle has brought peace to the range is the shadow removed from his trail—only then can Wade Holden know final redemption and claim his rich reward.



SHADOW ON THE TRAIL

by ZANE GREY



CHAPTER ONE

Ride the Man Down!

THE WHISTLE of the Texas Pacific express train nerved Wade Holden to dare one more argument against the unplanned holdup his chief had undertaken. Standing there in the dark night under the trees with the misty rain blowing in his face and the horses restlessly creaking leather, Wade thought swiftly.

"Listen, Simm," whispered Wade close to the ear of the lean dark outlaw beside him. "It's too sudden, this holdup. We've got the big bank job all ready."

"I've a hunch," replied Bell. "We're ridin' through this country. Bad weather. Passed the towns at night. No one

has seen us. Wade, I'll get you a bunch of money like pickin' it off bushes."

"But these two strangers. We don't know them."

"Blue says he knows them. That's enough for me."

"Chief, I don't trust Randall Blue," returned Wade. "Ever since I saw him talking to that ranger, Pell. He's—"

"What? You saw him?"

"I did. They had a serious talk. I believe Blue has agreed to double-cross you."

"Hellfire! Would you face him with that?"

"I'd be only too glad."

"And you'd kill him. Son, you're a bad hombre when you go against a man. But I'll not have you splittin' my band."

"Simm, you read that last notice of reward offered for you, alive or dead. Ten thousand dollars!"

"Cap Mahaffey has raised the ante. I'm somebody worth gettin' now. But those damned rangers will never get me alive."

"They'll get you dead, though. That Texas bunch has been after you for two years. They'd had you but for your many friends. Let's not risk this holdup with Blue. And ride on our way to meet the gang. Blue will not know of our bank job at Mercer."

"I told him, Wade."

The train rumbled into the dimly lighted station and rattled to a halt with the engine down at the end of the platform.

"Come on, Wade, I'll get you some easy money," rasped Bell, dragging his young companion with a powerful hand.

They ran across the road. In the yellow flare of light Wade saw Blue accost the conductor with a sharp "Hands up!" The other two men, who called themselves Smith and Hazlitt, would by this time be climbing aboard the engine to take care of the engineer and brakeman. In a moment more Wade heard harsh voices in the engine cab.

"Here's the express car," whispered Bell. "That express messenger is openin' the door. Well, of all the luck! Leave it to me, Wade, but look sharp."

They stole along the car to the door that slid to a halt. Behind a leveled gun Bell stuck his head and shoulders into the car. "Hands up!"

The messenger slowly straightened with hands up, his face turning white. Bell leaped up into the car. Holden followed with drawn gun.

"Cover him while I look round," said the chief.

The express car was well lighted. Wade saw a few boxes ready for delivery. A large iron safe stood back against the far wall. Bell gave it a heave.

"Too heavy!—Force him to open it."

"I can't. That's the Wells-Fargo safe. They don't give me the combination."

"Open up or we'll kill you!"

"Kill and be damned. I can't—I tell you."

"What's in these?" demanded Bell, kicking some oblong packages lying beside the safe.

"I don't know," replied the express messenger.

The robber glanced around for some kind of implement and espied an ax. Seizing it he struck the top package a

hard blow. There was a musical jingle of coins.

"Money," Bell cried out and struck open the end of the package. Gold coins rolled out.

"Double eagles! Look at 'em, pard. Pick them loose ones up." With a bound at the messenger, Bell felled him with a blow of the gun. "How about my hunch, boy? Easiest job we ever had! Slide those packages to the door."

Bell leaped down upon the platform to peer back toward the station. "Blue's comin'. Blue, run forward and get your pards."

Wade filled his coat pockets with the loose coins, leaving some on the floor. Then he closed the end of the package Bell had broken and carried it to the door. The next one he slid across. By the time he had moved the five bundles, Blue had returned with his two partners.

"Each grab one and run for your hoss," ordered Bell.

Wade leaped down and grasped the last package. It was heavy and he needed his gun hand to help. Thus burdened he ran after the dark form ahead of him. In another moment he was out of the flare of light and in the gloom. Shriill cries pealed from the station. Wade reached his companions more by sound than sight. Two were already mounted.

"Hand it—up," panted the chief.

Wade removed his cloth mask and mounted to take the extra package that his chief held on his saddle.

"There! We're all set. Ride close to me. Look sharp—for that road across the track—to the south. And here comes the rain—to wash out our tracks."

Wade Holden rode behind Smith and Hazlitt. It seemed significant to him

that the robber chief placed himself in front beside Blue. Rain began to fall heavily. Wade had a waterproof coat tied on his saddle and in removing this he had to shift the package that Bell had handed him. Somehow it did not seem so heavy and hard as the others. He squeezed it. Through the thick wrapping paper and cardboard he felt the contents was currency.

The trotting horses soon left the station behind in the black night. Shouts and calls died away. The discharge of a shotgun back there elicited much glee from the chief.

The rain became a steady downpour. Wade rested his package endwise on his saddle and buckled it under his coat to keep it dry.

"Hold on," called out Bell presently. "We're passin' that turn-off. Blue, I thought you knew the road."

"I do. But it's so damn dark," explained the other.

"Well, I've been along here myself if you want to know," replied Bell gruffly, and rode to the left across the track.

Wade sank comfortably in his saddle for another of Simm Bell's long night rides. The sandy road gave forth little sound from hoofs, except an occasional splash of water. The road ahead appeared to be a pale obscure lane dividing two walls of gloom. After a while Bell grew tired of his volubility. Then the quintet rode on somber and silent, each occupied with his own thoughts.

Holden had an unaccountable, unshakable feeling of impending calamity for his chief. And he loved this free-handed robber. He had stood by Bell of late against his better judgment. The robber had gravitated from little inconsequential stealings to bloody crimes.

Nevertheless, Holden did not see how he could sever his connection with his chief. He and his family owed Bell a good deal. Wade's father had been a Missouri guerrilla during the Civil War. After the war he came home a crippled and ruined man. Bell had been one of his lieutenants and for some years he had practically taken care of the Holdens. But Simm too had been ruined by the free life of a guerrilla. He did not take kindly to farming. In the succeeding years he drifted to more vicious ways and took Wade with him.

That explained Wade Holden's presence there on this lonely Texas road, a robber, already at twenty-two notorious for his quick and deadly gunplay, and marked by the Texas Rangers along with Simm Bell.

They rode on through the long dark hours at a steady trot. They passed isolated ranch houses at intervals and one village where all but watchdogs were wrapped in slumber.

It rained hardest during the dark hour before dawn. Then with the gray break of day the rain let up and there was a prospect of clearing weather. Sunrise found Bell leading his men off the road into a wood where, some distance in, they halted in a grassy glade.

"We'll rest the hosses and dry off," said Bell cheerily, as he dismounted. "That farmer back aways is a friend of mine. We can get grub."

"Wal, Bell, if it's all the same to you, we'll be ridin' on," said Smith, a freckled, evil-eyed man.

"Smith, it's not all the same to me. And who do you mean by we?" Bell returned coolly.

"Me an' Hazlitt hyar. We're ridin' on with our share."

"Who'n hell said anythin' about your share?" queried Bell sharply, and de-

liberately he lifted the heavy package of coin off Smith's saddle, and then, even more forcefully, repeated the action with Hazlitt, Blue was in the act of dismounting with his treasure. Bell relieved him of it and laid it beside the others on a log. Holden got off his horse and placed his package on the log, too, but apart from the others.

"I kept mine dry," he observed, and covered it with his coat. This precaution was only a blind. Wade did not want to be hampered if trouble ensued.

"Wal, Bell," began Smith presently, "nobody said anythin' about a divvy, but shore that was understood."

"I always pay men who work with me," replied the leader.

"Pay! Wal, what do you aim to pay us?"

"Reckon one of them packages more than squares your work in that little job."

"Wal, we don't reckon that way," said Smith. "We want an equal divvy. There're five of us, an' five bundles of gold. One for each of us."

"Smith, you and Hazlitt take one pack of this gold and go on your way."

"Nope. I won't agree to that. You'll give Blue one pack. An' he didn't take as big a part in the job as Jim an' me."

"Blue used to trail with me."

"Wal, I hev my doubts about his trailin' with you now. Ask him who he was sendin' telegrams to yestiddy, when we hit the railroad at Belton."

"Telegrams!" ejaculated Bell, and slowly turned to Blue with a singular vibration through his wiry frame. "Rand, did you send telegrams yesterday?"

"Yes. I wired my folks not to expect me home soon," replied Blue, suavely enough.

"But you told me you *told* them before you came to meet me."

"I know. But my telegram made it definite," added Blue, his lips just shading gray.

"Ahuh," grunted Bell, subtly changing.

"Chief, he's a liar!" interposed Holden sharply.

"Mebbe he is, at that. But let's settle with these hombres first," said Bell caustically. "Smith, do you and Hazlitt accept what I offered?"

"I should smile we don't," snapped Smith viciously.

"All right then. You get nothin'," retorted the robber chief.

Smith's reply was to draw his gun. "Bell, you'll divvy or—" he rasped.

Holden deliberated a moment, divining the instant for his interference. Simm Bell laughed. He had been in such situations before.

"What's your idee?"

"You agree to a square divvy."

"Simm Bell never goes back on his word."

"You'll go back on it now—or I'll kill you an' take all this gold!" rang out Smith, beginning to quiver.

Holden flashed into action. His shot clubbed Smith down bloody-faced and limp. His second, delivered while Hazlitt was drawing, took that worthy in the middle and cut short a curse of rage. Hazlitt's weapon exploded and went spinning while he fell over the log and began to flop all over the grass. Bell drew his gun and deliberately put a stop to both ghastly sounds and struggles.

"Once more, boy," he said grimly. "I reckon I'll be owin' you considerable one of these days."

Holden stepped over the dead Smith to shove his gun into Blue's abdomen.

"Blue, you've double-crossed the chief,"

he declared. "I saw you talking to Pell. I guessed that deal. You planned with the rangers to trap Bell—betray him into their hands."

"Yes—yes, I did," cried Blue hoarsely. "They had me. They put the job up to me. I listened—I consented. But I—I didn't mean to do it."

"Liar!"

Bell pushed Wade back and faced his friend. "My Gawd, Rand, you didn't plot with rangers to trap me?"

"What could I do? Pell had me dead to rights on that Uncas raid," cried the man huskily, realizing how near death he was. "I was recognized. None of the rangers have ever seen you. Pell asked what you looked like. And I lied. They made me choose between arrest and agreeing to—to a plan to trap you. I had to do it, Simm—but I swear to God I meant to double-cross them, not you."

"Blue, you're lying again," thundered Holden. "You wired Pell we'd planned to rob the Mercer bank."

"No, I didn't," shouted Blue.

Bell knocked Holden's gun up in the nick of time. It boomed and the powder blackened Blue's face.

"Hold, you blood-spillin' young devil," yelled Bell. "This man has befriended me. I can't let you kill him on suspicion." Then he pushed Holden back and confronted Blue. "Rand, it looks bad. Fork your hoss and slope. I'm givin' you the benefit of a doubt. But if you have double-crossed me you'd better ride to the end of the earth. Because I'll track you down and kill you!"

Randall Blue leaped astride his horse and spurred it into the brush.

Two days later Bell and Holden were approaching the hamlet of Belknap, Denton County, Texas, in an old spring

wagon drawn by a scrawny team of horses.

They looked like two uncouth farmers. The wagon appeared to contain camp utensils, bedding, food supplies, and hay. No observer would have suspected that under the seat hidden by tools and old canvas reposed a fortune in gold and currency.

At a crossroad the travelers were overtaken by a party of horsemen.

"Ahuh. Rangers. I'll do the talkin'," whispered Bell.

There were ten men in the group that halted Bell, lean, hawk-eyed riders, heavily armed and superbly mounted. The foremost, evidently the leader, leaned from his saddle to scrutinize Bell and Holden.

"I'm Captain Mahaffey of Company Eight, Texas Rangers," he announced. "Have you seen anything of a bunch of horsemen, five in number, riding south on this road?"

"No, sir, we haven't," drawled Bell. "We seed a niggah on a mule about—"

"How long have you been on this road?" interrupted the bronzed ranger impatiently.

"Wal, lemme see. We dropped in on this heah road sometime this mawnin', comin' from Yorkville, where we stayed all night. I reckon about mid-mawnin'."

"Where are you going?"

"Me an' my brother air bound for Denton County to homestead some land over there. We ain't shore jest where."

The officer seemed baffled. "Boys, it looks like that gang of train robbers rode through last night or yesterday. They're in the breaks by this time. We're stuck. Pell's tip came too late."

"Mister Ranger, has there been a train holdup?" asked Bell.

"Yes. Three nights ago. A Texas Central express car was robbed at Hailey. The robbers made off with thirty thousand dollars. Looks like a Simm Bell job. Did you ever hear of him?"

"Simm Bell?" mused the robber chief reflectively. "I reckon I've heerd that name somewhere."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed the captain. "If you're a Texan you must have lived on the Staked Plain. Thanks, homesteaders, and good luck."

"Same to you, Cap. Hope you ketch that Simm Bell," replied Bell, and whipping the reins he clucked to the team and started on.

"Beaten again!" rolled out the captain, his deep voice ringing. "That robber Bell has too many friends in Central Texas. But if it's the last ranger job I ever do, I'll ride the man down!"

"Simm, did you hear that?" whispered Wade, glancing over his shoulder to see the rangers turn east on the crossroad.

"Huh! I'll never forget what he said," growled Bell. "Ride the man down! Sounds like he meant that. Aw hell! Talk takes no skin off my back. Talk is cheap. And I've sure got friends in this country."

"Enemies too, Simm. Don't overlook that."

"He said Pell's tip was too late. What'd he mean, Wade?"

"I don't know. Maybe Blue wired Pell."

"Aw no—no! Rand wouldn't do a dirty trick like that."

"We'll see. But at least we've got a hunch to lay off on that Mercer bank job."

"Lay off nothin'," returned Bell with an impatient snarl.

"Simm, we've got plenty of money for a while. We can hide up in Smoky till all this blows over."

"After we bust that Mercer bank. Them rangers took some other hosses' tracks for ours. Makin' for the breaks east. They're off our tracks. It'll be just the right time. Lawd, won't ole Cap roar!"

CHAPTER TWO

Ambush

SMOKY HOLLOW was the favorite hiding-place of Simm Bell after one of his raids.

It lay in western Denton County which was sparsely settled over that rough country, and was a deep wide gorge at the headwaters of Clear Creek and so densely wooded that it made an almost impenetrable jungle.

By driving unremittingly all next day Bell and Holden had arrived at the wooded rim of the gorge late in the afternoon. They unhitched the wagon and hid it in a clump of tamaracks.

"It might come in handy," remarked Bell. "But the hosses we'll give away. Not a bad idee. The rest of the outfit we'll pack down the trail."

"Like hob we will. Not in one trip or two."

"That's so. I'm not very smart. How much can you pack?"

Holden was buckling on his heavy gun belt. "Reckon my saddle, my rifle—and my package of bills, if it is bills."

Wade drew his knife and slit the heavy wrapper, tore open a corner to expose the neatly tied end of a packet of greenbacks.

"Fifties! And I gave you that bundle! Well, son, I'll not go back on it. Now I'll go down after the gang. Reckon

two of them packs of coin are all I can carry. You stay here. Better hide your share. I'll give you a handful of gold pieces so you can jingle them in your pocket."

With grunts of satisfaction and effort Bell started down the trail burdened with all he could carry. Wade took his saddlebags, his coat and his share of the loot back into the woods a little way, and sat down to examine his prize and decide what to do with it.

Wade mechanically began to count the money. There were two packs of fifty-dollar bills aggregating \$5,000. Then he found two bundles of one-hundred-dollar bills, the sum of which made \$10,000. Here he began to sweat, and his fingers trembled. Besides these, there were packages of twenties, tens, and fives, which he did not take the time to count and add. The twenties he hid in the lining of his coat, where money had secretly reposed before. The smaller bills he stowed away in his saddlebags. The packets of large bills fitted in the inside pockets of his loose leather vest and there he determined to sew them securely. This done, Wade repaired to the trail and sat down to wait.

At length voices disrupted this strange mood that had of late obsessed him. Soon a low whistle wafted up. Holden replied with the same birdcall. It was not long then until he saw Arkansas's lanky figure and red bewhiskered visage ascending the trail. After him plodded the thickset, swarthy Bill Morgan and last came Pony Heston, the blond giant of the gang.

"Howdy, son," Arkansas panted. "Where's all—that yaller coin—the boss raved about?"

"Ark, did Simm tell you about that fool holdup?" asked Wade.

"He did. An' I—shore cussed him. But all the rest—of the gang—took it like pie."

"Here. You rustle these two packs. Pony, you take this one and what else you can carry. Bill, you lug the rest."

They all talked at once, husky-voiced, gleeful, like boys who had broken into a watermelon patch. Wade got them started down, then followed, so burdened with his heavy load that he fell behind.

Gradually the eager robbers ahead of Wade descended out of hearing. He deposited his burden in a likely place and sat down to rest. The dreamy sweetness of this wilderness stole over Wade anew. He could see the tunnels in the green foliage—deer and bear trails—leading down. A glimpse of sunset gold through an aperture in the canopy overhead reminded him that the day was closing. He started down again.

Golden twilight fell before him, augmenting the beauty and mystery of the gorge. He saw the level floor before he descended to it. Great oaks, walnuts, elms stood in stately confusion, marking the center of the hollow where the creek wound its alternately swift and eddying way.

At the brink, where the clear stream flowed shallowly over flat stone, Holden deposited his burden again to kneel and drink. How cold, how sweet this water!

He went across, and before twilight had yielded to darkness he espied the light of a campfire through the trees.

If Wade had expected to find a hilarious company he missed his guess. Gilchrist, the red-shirted cook, was busy at his campfire, upon which pots and kettles steamed. Oberney, a weazened little Texan with a visage like a rat

was laboriously and greedily counting gold coins. Tex Corning stood tall and slim in the firelight, his sallow face and drooping sandy mustache giving him an appearance of solemnity. Morgan, Pony Heston, and Muddy Ackers stood expectantly before Bell, who had a bottle of whisky in his hand. Nick Allen, the cowman of the gang, was lifting a cup to his bearded lips.

"Wal, heah's to you, Simm," Arkansas was saying, and drained his cup.

Wade soon ascertained that the fact of rangers being on Bell's trail accounted for the comparative seriousness of the robbers. Gilchrist soon called them to supper. They ate mostly in silence.

"Boys, I'm dog-tired, but I reckon I'll smoke and talk a bit before turnin' in," Bell said after the meal. "I've divided that gold among you all, takin' the smallest share myself," he went on. "Maybe it was a fool job, in view of the big bank deal on hand, I reckon it was. But it's done. There's no more to say, onless we figure on whether Rand Blue doublecrossed me or not. I'd like your angle on that."

"What's yours, chief?" queried Heston.

"I just can't believe Rand would be so low-down. But Wade made him admit he'd agreed with Pell to trap me. Rand swore to God he had to do it or go to jail. I reckon I still have faith in him."

Three of the gang who had been with Pell and Blue in several recent robberies backed up the chief. Three others who knew Blue better were noncommittal.

"Wal, I never liked his eye," was Nick Allen's contribution to the hearing.

Plainly the chief suffered under the lack of unanimous faith in his friend

Blue. "Arkansas, you're glum as an owl. Are you agin Blue?"

"Boss, I shore don't like the look of it one damn bit," said Arkansas. "I'd say it'd be wise to rustle for the breaks of the Rio Grande an' hole up for six months."

"After we raid that Mercer bank?" queried the chief gruffly.

"No. Thet job can wait. Let's go pronto."

"When we put off jobs we never do them."

"Which so far has turned out lucky for us."

"I'll do what I've never done before. Put a deal to a vote."

One by one he questioned his men, first as to the advisability of deserting Smoky Hollow, and secondly whether or not to rob the Mercer bank. Wade and Arkansas were the only two members who voted to leave the camp at once and give up the Mercer job.

"That settles the deal," said the chief, without his usual animation. "My vote wouldn't count one way or another. We'll rest up tomorrow, get in the hosses, hide this camp outfit, and when night comes hit the road for Mercer. Next day we'll raid that bank as planned and then light out for the Rio Grande."

Holden left his comrades in high spirits and unrolled his bed some distance from the campfire. He had just stretched out comfortably when he heard Bell tramping around calling him.

"Over here, chief," he replied.

Bell came stalking black against the fire flare and sat down beside Holden.

"What's on your mind, Simm?"

"Kinda hard to get out, boy," replied Bell, haltingly for him. "But it's been botherin' me the last day or so, since

we run into Cap Mahaffey. That old geezer sort of galled me. *'Ride the man down!'* Damn his Texas soul!"

"Simm, he meant it. Mahaffey is on his mettle. He'll have to catch you or get out of the ranger service. You've caused it a lot of grief."

"Ahuh, I reckon. It's not ticklin' me much just now. Boy, here's the idee that's been growin' on me. Suppose tomorrow night you give us the slip an' light out of Texas forever!"

"*Simm!*" whispered Wade, aghast.

"You're still only a boy," went on Bell hurriedly. "I kinda feel responsible for you. Your mother was a good woman. And your sister Lil is a fine girl. You've had schoolin', and you're a darned handsome boy. Turn honest, Wade! It'd be a load off my mind."

"Thanks, chief," replied Wade with emotion, as he pressed the outlaw's hand resting on his bed. "But no. I won't do it—not while you're alive!"

"Aw, I'm sorry. I was afraid you wouldn't," replied the chief gloomily. "But Wade—if I should be—" He broke off huskily.

"All right, Simm. If they get you—and not me—I promise."



Mercer was a good-sized town in central Texas, having one long main street, the middle block of which consisted of the important stores and saloons. Opposite the hotel on the corner stood the Mercer bank building, a new structure more imposing than the modest edifices that neighbored it.

Four horsemen, riding close together, turned out of a side street a block down from the hotel almost precisely

at the same moment that seven other riders appeared from an opposite direction. They trotted their horses toward each other.

"Boss, I shore don't like the way them people air fadin' off the street," observed Arkansas.

The four horsemen had reached a point almost opposite the hotel, diagonally across from which frowned the stone-faced bank, when Wade Holden seized Bell's arm and hissed:

"Hold, chief! I saw sunshine glint on a rifle barrel in that open window above the bank!"

"I seen it, Boss," corroborated Arkansas coolly. "We're ambushed."

"*Blue!* Damn his treacherous soul!" growled Bell.

"Boss, make a break—quick!" advised Arkansas, sharply.

Wade saw a man in his shirt sleeves appear at an open door. He was not a ranger, but probably a citizen too excited to wait for orders. He raised a rifle and fired. Wade heard the sickening thud of the bullet striking flesh. Bell was knocked clean out of his saddle. Arkansas snatched at the bridle of the rearing horse.

Swift as a flash Holden dropped out of his saddle. He leveled his gun at the fellow who was again aiming the rifle, froze with deadly precision and fired. That man pitched up an exploding rifle and fell out in the street. Other shots rang out with the pounding of hoofs. Bell was getting to his feet.

"Rustle, Wade," shouted Arkansas. "Help him up!"

Wade boosted his chief into the saddle then leaped into his own and whipped out two guns. Heston was galloping away, swaying to and fro. A volley of shots burst from the upper story of the bank. Wild yells, thunder of hoofs,

boom of guns accompanied the flight of Tex Corning's horsemen, as they tore down the street in the opposite direction. Wade saw one saddle emptied.

He wheeled his frightened mount after Arkansas, who was supporting Bell in the saddle with one hand and firing his gun with the other. Wade took snap shots at the puffs of smoke from the open windows above the bank. The street was deserted. Rifles cracked from the hotel. Bullets whistled all around Wade, to strike up the dust on the street.

Suddenly Arkansas plunged headlong out of his saddle, to slide into the gutter. His horse broke its gait. Wade sheathed the gun in his left hand and reached to support the reeling Bell. Then their horses turned the corner and stretched out for the open country.

Wade no longer heard shots. Only the rhythmic beat of swift hoofs! The country road stretched straight ahead, a lonely yellow lane between unfenced rangelands.

Holden looked back. No pursuers in sight yet! But he knew there would be soon. He looked ahead. Miles—to the broken country of timber and brush.

Bell swayed heavily in the saddle. Wade held his arm to keep him from falling. The fleet horses were now running even, and at that gait would soon reach the cover ahead. If Simm could only hold out! Once in the woody hills Wade could evade pursuers and look to his chief's wound.

"Wade—I can't—stick on," Bell panted hoarsely.

"Simm!—you must," cried Holden, suddenly sick with dread. "Only to the woods! It's not far. Simm, remember what Mahaffey said."

"No hope, boy. I'm done. Go on—alone. Save yourself."

Bell pulled at his bridle, slowing his horse. Wade had to follow suit, just managing by dint of effort to keep his chief from falling.

"We mustn't stop!" cried Wade tensely, looking back fearfully. "No riders in sight!"

"Got to. It's the end—boy—Run for your life!"

"No," flashed Wade in frantic passion. He turned the horses off the road under a wide-spreading elm, and leaped off just in time to catch the lurching Bell.

The chief sank under the tree to lean against it. His face was ashen white. There was dew on his brow and a terrible light in his eyes, a bloody froth on his lips.

"My God! Simm!" burst out Wade, in terror.

"Shot clean through, boy—and I'll go—with my boots on. Who did it?—A ranger?"

"No. Some man in his shirt sleeves. I killed him, Simm!"

"Ahu. Look, boy. Any riders in sight?"

Wade leaped up to peer down the road. A group of eight or ten horsemen had turned the bend.

"Yes! Rangers!" exclaimed Wade stridently. "Coming slow. Tracking us. Two miles or more back."

Bell opened his coat with his free hand. The other still clutched his shirt. Blood oozed out between his fingers. At the sight Wade uttered a loud cry and sank to his knees beside his friend.

"Oh Simm! Simm!" he moaned. "If you'd only listened to me!"

"Too late, boy. I'm sorry—Here, take this." And he handed a heavy leather wallet to Wade. "Never mind the gold—too heavy." He thrust the wallet in

Wade's coat pocket. "Fork your hoss—and ride. Remember your promise."

"No. I won't leave you," blazed Wade, leaping up to snatch his Winchester from the saddle sheath.

"Go, you wild boy! Do you want me to see—you killed? You can get away."

"Simm, I can kill the whole bunch."

Bell cursed Wade to leave him.

"I'll stick, Simm," replied Wade coolly.

The ranger posse was now less than half a mile away. In a moment surely they would see the horses and guess the situation. Then Wade saw that a stand of bushes down the road must hide the two horses from the rangers. And he calculated this cover would persist until the posse got within a hundred yards.

"Run, boy—for my sake!" said Bell huskily.

Wade shook his head, grimly gazing down the road. He was calculating distance. The rangers were coming at a jogtrot. Captain Mahaffey, square-shouldered and stalwart, his bronze face gleaming, rode beside a ranger who was bending from his saddle, his eyes glued to the horse tracks they were following.

"Simm, in less than a minute now Cap Mahaffey will be biting the dust," said Wade piercingly.

"Lower that rifle!"

Wade heard but paid no attention to this, although a strange stifled cry from his dying chief tore at his heart-strings. Wade raised the rifle higher. Luck was on his side. If at his first shots they did not scatter like quail that would be the end of Mahaffey's squad.

"Wade!"

It was not the inflection of command in Bell's voice that struck through

Wade. The rifle wavered, half leveled. Mahaffey's rangers rode out from behind the line of bushes.

"Wade, I'm—your real father. Your mother loved me—Jim Holden never knew."

"Oh, God!" cried Wade, stricken to the soul. That had been the bond between him and this robber chief. He wheeled. He leaped back to kneel.

"My father! Oh, why didn't you tell me long ago?"

"I couldn't, son. I'm glad—now. Go!—Run for your life! Let me die—knowing—you got away—your promise—"

Bell's words failed, but the look in his eyes was one Wade could not disobey. It wrung the words "I'll keep my promise" from him. He passed a swift shaking hand over Bell's pallid face, and it appeared that with that first and last caress a beautiful light began to fade in the big wide eyes.

Shrill yells brought Wade erect. He shoved the rifle home in its sheath and in a single spring made the saddle. The spirited horse leaped as from a catapult. Above the yells and shots, Mahaffey's stentorian voice pealed out:

"Ride the man down!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Chase

HEAVY gunshots close behind Wade as he spurred his horse into flight caused him to turn in the saddle. Bell was sitting up, his hands extended with red-flashing guns. His shots upset the charging band of rangers. They spread on each side of the road to give the elm a wide berth. One ranger toppled from his saddle and another had to be sup-

ported. Wade saw Bell fall forward on his face.

Wade let out a terrible cry and turned his dimmed gaze ahead. He knew he had seen his father die.

It seemed that his mind received a strange and flashing illumination. He would escape. He would live to fulfill the pledge he had made his father. It gave him such unquestioning faith that no pursuit, no hardship, no future menace could ever eradicate it.

When Wade raised his head again to look back he saw six rangers in pursuit some three hundred rods behind. Two of the original posse had been eliminated. The sextet, riding two abreast, were holding their own with Wade. He recognized the broad-shouldered Mahaffey.

Wade forced himself to desperate calculation of chances. He must not make a mistake. The rangers, long used to the pursuit of criminals, seldom blundered.

Leaning back, Wade untied his slicker which contained a blanket rolled around a pack of provisions and some bags of Bell's gold. It weighed fifty pounds or more. Wade let it slide off to roll in the road. His idea was to lessen the burden of his horse and possibly check the rangers. When pursuing train or bank robbers they never passed by discarded packs. In this instance Mahaffey evidently ordered one of his men to halt and see what the fugitive had abandoned. The others kept on without slackening their pace.

Wooded rolling country lay no farther ahead than between two and three miles. The road appeared to turn into a defile between green hills.

No doubt Mahaffey felt sure of his quarry, else his men would have resorted to rifles long ago. Wade dreaded

that contingency. The intervening distance was not great enough; a good rifle shot could hit him or his horse before they could get out of range. Yet Wade felt his best game was to hold the black in, let the pursuers keep about the same distance or else gain a little, until he reached the wooded country. Once there, he would decide on his course.

The next time Wade looked back he saw the sixth rider coming up from the rear and gaining on his fellows. He rode a fast horse, undoubtedly the fastest of that posse. It appeared to be a lean mustang, rather rangier than the others and a horse to fear.

"Save yourself, Blackie," called Wade to his running mount. "Steady now! Hold in."

The wide plains of the rangeland began to fall behind in timber-bordered wings. Wade was fast approaching the wooded country. Soon he saw it from the height of a ridge which sloped down into a valley. Then he ascertained that this was just one of the timbered creek bottoms so prevalent in Texas. But it was cover and in the thick of it he would be hard to head.

Wade resorted to a ruse that might throw his pursuers off the track. He did not wait until the road reached the woods, but left it and cut across in plain sight of the rangers to ride into the brush.

They would have to track him, which rangers were trained to do. They seldom lost a trail but they would have to go slowly, while he could accommodate his gait to the lay of the ground. A thicket of brambles and scrub oak offered poor travel on horseback. Wade turned to the right and rode as fast as he could under the trees, over logs and through brush to the shallow creek

into which he spurred Blackie despite a possibility of quicksand.

The horse had difficulty but made the crossing without getting mired. Twice Wade came within an ace of riding out upon the road again. Creek bottom and timbered belts narrowed between hills. Wade feared he might get boxed in, and halted his horse at a point where he could peep over the brush to see back along a quarter mile of the road.

This would give Blackie a rest, while the ranger horses would still be going. It struck Wade that Mahaffey might be too keen to send all his men into the brush to work out his tracks. Some of them might keep to the road. Wade bent far over, away from his creaking saddle, to listen, and his reward was a sound of hoofbeats on the road beyond the bend. Without a moment's hesitation he urged Blackie out of the brush into a run.

Blackie ran easily along the winding creek-bottom road. It grew rocky and rough, necessitating a lessening speed. It followed and crossed the creek, wound through dells of elm and sycamore where slants of golden sunlight lightened the green gloom. When the road began to climb away from the creek then Wade knew he would soon be out from cover.

So it turned out. Wade found himself once more in the open rangeland. To his surprise and concern he found that the creek bottom had doubled back with the road, making a wide bend. What if the rangers were aware of that?

The black ears of his horse shot up. Wade turned his gaze from left to right. Three riders were sweeping across the plateau to head him off. One was Mahaffey and another was the ranger on the lean buckskin mustang.

"Out, Blackie! Run!" yelled Wade to his horse, and goaded him with the spurs. The black leaped as if he had been standing still, and in a few moments of dead run the danger that the rangers might head off Wade was over. They dashed into the road a full hundred rods behind. But not so far that Wade failed to hear Mahaffey's far-carrying yell of baffled rage!

A peculiar familiar hot hiss in the air close to Wade's head was followed by the crack of a rifle shot. Wade glanced back over his shoulder. The lean ranger was out in front of Mahaffey and the others. His mustang had free rein and was running, stretched low, on the instant a puff of white smoke rose. If Wade had not instinctively ducked he would have gotten a bullet through his middle. As it was, it cut him across the top of his head, tugging away his sombrero.

Bending low and forward Wade called to the horse, "Run Blackie!"

Bullets were striking up the dust in front of Wade. His pursuers were all shooting. Wade looked back. The lean ranger on the buckskin mustang had the lead on his comrades. Mahaffey was second and he was shooting a carbine. The third rode to one side behind him and he had a rifle to his shoulder. Far back on the road the other three rangers hove in sight.

The lean rider was reloading his Winchester. Mahaffey shot with more haste than judgment. His bullets skipped along the dusty road. The third man was more dangerous. His lead whipped up the dust behind Wade. He was shooting to cripple Blackie.

The horse bore a charmed life. In less than two miles he doubled the hundred rods between him and the rangers. He grew hot and settled into his swiftest,

a pace that blurred the sides of the road in Wade's sight.

Mahaffey ceased to waste more ammunition. The time came when a third ranger gave up shooting, but still came tearing on at the top speed of his mustang. It was the lean rider on the buckskin that Blackie had to beat. This ranger gradually fell back. He was already beaten, except for that rifle.

Wade felt something wet and hot trickling down his left arm. Blood! He experienced no pain. Could that blood come from the wound in his head? Changing the bridle over to his left hand he felt his arm. He had been shot through that arm without knowing it. The bone was still intact.

Blackie, with his magnificent stride, ran almost out of range of the relentless pursuer. Only a few more rods! The lean rider was aiming high. His bullets, almost spent, no longer whipped up the spiteful swirls of dust. Then almost at the moment of victory one of those missiles caught Blackie somewhere in the flank. He broke and plunged, then recovered to go on.

Wade cursed, frantically, feeling the change of muscular rhythm in the horse. But Blackie did not go down. He recovered his stride enough to increase the advantage he had gained until he was out of range. Once more Wade attended to the road ahead, and the hour, and his pursuers.

The road was now wide, bare of grass, thickly packed with tracks of hoofs and wheels. He had come into the main artery of travel west. A wagon train had left those fresh marks. It could not be far ahead. The last rays of the setting sun flushed rough heights of land to the fore.

Behind Wade, a half mile or less on the road, came Mahaffey and his two

rangers, and about a like distance behind them galloped the other three.

For miles then the race held that way, with the edge wearing off the speed of the ranger's mustangs and Blackie slackening perceptibly.

The afterglow of sunset failed. Twilight crept out of the breaks of rough land ahead. Wade's hope revived. Blackie must have sustained only a superficial flesh wound. The road entered a pass with steep gravelly banks.

He kept on, trying not to believe that Blackie had broken his gait again. But soon Wade had to credit his senses. The horse was laboring. Gathering darkness favored Wade, as did the widening of the pass into a steep-walled gorge with clumps of trees and thickets on each side of the road. Water gleamed in the gloom under the left wall. The rangers would be gaining now. Another straight stretch of road would betray his plight to them.

It came, traversing a wide amphitheatre with unscalable walls and scanty timber, through which the road ran straight toward what might be a gateway into open country or a still narrower pocket.

Wade had no choice. As Blackie thundered on with weakening stride, Wade kept looking back. When he saw the rangers emerge from the pass, much closer to him, and heard their yells, a



coolness of despair settled down upon him. At the worst, he could only die and he would not die submissively. Only he would exhaust every possible chance before turning at bay.

The thoroughbred under Wade would go on till his heart cracked. But Wade began to pull him, intending to leave the saddle before being shot out of it. A last time he looked back. He could make out the group of dark riders against a pale skyline. They were within easy rifle shot of him, but he calculated that the black shadows in front of him made him invisible to them. Through the trees ahead he imagined he saw a pinpoint of light. The road turned, a dim lane between trees close to the looming walls.

Wade hauled Blackie off the road, and leaping down he gave the noble heaving horse a last pat, and broke into a run. He soon got out of the trees into another open space. Fleeing across this, Wade gained a thin line of brush. Pausing to pick his way he heard the pound of hoofs behind and excited shouts of men. The rangers had found Blackie.

"Spread out! Ride him down!" roared the inexorable Mahaffey.

Wade crouched there like a beast cornered. His chest heaved and his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. The rangers would soon be upon him. He ran on.

The canyon boxed. A bulging wall drove him into the road. It made another bend. When Wade got around it he heard the crashings of brush not far behind.

Suddenly the walls appeared to fall away on each side. That box had been a gateway into another oval. Rounding a thicket into a glade, he came upon horses that startled him so he nearly

dropped. They were riderless. Snorting, they thumped away. Hobbled! Then he saw lights beyond a fringe of trees. Campfires!

He went on, swerving to the left, hoping to get by under cover of the wall. He passed horses, oxen, canvas-covered wagons, always keeping himself behind the fringe of trees. Beyond this appeared an open space bright with fires.

Wade bent low and glided from tree to tree, making for the darkest place. At last he crawled to the edge of some bushes and lay still, burning hot, his heart bursting, dripping wet with sweat, his strength and endurance not equal to his spirit. He strove to control his whistling breath. In a moment more he moved on and peeped out.

A little tent had been pitched in the open not twenty feet from where Wade crouched. Beside it a girl knelt, placing sticks upon a campfire that had begun to blaze. She was humming a tune. Her tent sat somewhat apart from a great prairie schooner, beyond which blazed the fires of a big caravan.

Wade stood up, swallowing hard. While he lived there was a chance. Suddenly his glance came back to the girl.

She stood up in the light of her fire, a grown girl, slender and dark. He strode out to confront her.

"Girl—for God's sake—hide me!" he panted.

She recoiled, her big dark eyes flaring with fright. They took in Wade's white, blood-streaked face, and the dripping hand he held out beseechingly.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"I'm a—fugitive," he panted. "Rangers after me. They've shot me—twice. They're close—on my trail. They'll kill me! For mercy's sake—hide me!"

She stared at him as if fascinated.

At that instant a commotion broke out in the camp, caused by pound of hoofs and shout of men.

"Who comes there?" yelled a man.

"Mahaffey's Rangers," came the booming reply.

"What you want?"

"We're runnin' down an outlaw. He's heah. Just fell off his hawss—shot bad. Saddle all bloody. Look sharp, you—campers! Ride, men—he cain't get away. Ride him down!"

The girl darted to her tent. "Quick! Hide in here," she whispered, opening the flaps.

Wade leaped to fall inside. She slipped in after him and drawing the flaps close, she peeped out.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Girl

WADE sank down on a soft bed of blankets. The awful clamp around his heart eased its icy grip. Against the light of the fire outside he saw the profile of the girl as she peered out. Pounding of hoofs, babel of voices, shrill whistles resounded.

"They've ridden on," whispered the girl, turning to Wade. "That ranger, Captain Mahaffey, is my uncle!"

"They'll come—back," he panted. "Your—uncle?"

She watched and listened again at the aperture, during which few moments Wade recovered his breath. The clip-clop of trotting horses lessened in volume, and also the shouts. Only the steady hum of talking men continued.

"What are—they doing?" asked Wade huskily.

"Riding to and fro—everywhere," she replied.

"How far does this canyon go?"

"It opens right heah into the prairie."

"Could I climb the bank?"

"No. Too high and steep."

Silence ensued while the girl continued to peer out.

"I'd better go back—climb out below somewhere," he muttered.

"You stay heah. Dad's men are watching. Besides, you're wounded. You were staggering."

She gave a slight start and whispered fearfully, "There! They are riding back—up to dad and the men by the fire."

Wade bent forward to peep between the flaps of the tent. Less than a hundred paces away sat the closest of the rangers—the lean rider on the buckskin. Mahaffey, his big face red in the firelight, was in the center of the line. They had halted not far beyond the first canvas-covered wagon where the men of the caravan stood waiting.

"Well, Cap, no luck, eh? We could have spared you the trouble. No man has come through our camp."

"Hell! I saw him get off his horse," replied Mahaffey in ringing impatience. "Pen, you're trail boss of this caravan?"

"I am. Bound for New Mexico," rejoined the leader.

"All right; sorry I'll have to search your camp."

"Go ahead. But I reckon you're exceeding yore authority."

"A captain of Texas Rangers can search any place or arrest any one."

"I know all about you rangers," replied Pencarrow dryly. "I said go ahead. But be careful. My wife and kids air in this outfit. And so air other families."

"Off, men!" ordered Mahaffey peremptorily. "Search the camp. He's crawled in somewhere. Search the tents—the wagons, in and out. Everywhere a jack rabbit could hide."

Wade sank back on his knees. The girl, still holding the tent flap aside, turned to see his tortured face.

She pushed him back. "Stay here. I'll save you. Get under the blanket—far over."

As Wade stretched out she covered him from foot to head. He lay still, his heart throbbing painfully, slowly awakening to the reality of the girl. She had nerve.

"They're coming," she whispered, peering out. "Left our wagon to the last. Dad's with them—and if he's not hopping mad I don't know him."

Wade began to distinguish voices.

"Men, heah's the last wagon. Look out now." Mahaffey pounded on the iron-bound wheel with the butt of a gun. "Hey, young feller, I'm gettin' tired callin' you to come oot. If you have any sense you'll surrender."

A moment's silence ensued, fraught with suspense.

"Not thet hombre, Boss," drawled one of the rangers. "He'll die like Simm Bell died—with his guns bellerin'."

"Never shot once at us," said another.

"Thet shore stumped me," declared Mahaffey, as if mystified. "Men, we cain't overlook that, Holden, if you're in there come out," he called ringingly. "I'll remember thet so far as we know you've never shot at a Texas Ranger."

Wade listened to all this with bated breath. The girl knelt at the aperture, strung and intent, singularly cool.

"Go in, men, an' dig about," ordered Mahaffey in chagrin.

There were forthcoming sundry sounds

and voices that attested to a thorough search of the wagon.

"No good, Boss," declared a ranger.

"All right. Come out. Heah's another tent. Have a look in thet."

The girl slipped the flaps together and with deft hands tied the strings. That left the tent opaque and dim from the firelight outside. She crawled upon the bed, and getting to her knees she began to take off her blouse.

"Mahaffey, thet's my daughter's tent," said Pencarrow. "If she's there no one opens it."

"I don't care a damn whose tent it is," declared the crabbed captain.

"Wal, you will care if my lass is in it," returned Pencarrow coolly. "Jacqueline, air you heah?"

"Yes, Dad. Is supper ready? What's all the fuss about?"

"Rangers heah, lass. Yore uncle, Cap Mahaffey. They're searchin' our camp for an escaped outlaw. Can they see in yore tent?"

"Texas Rangers! My Uncle! Indeed they cain't! I'm undressed."

She had only removed her blouse, which she was in the act of laying on the bed. Her white rounded arms and breast gleamed palely.

"Excuse me, Jackie," spoke up Mahaffey deferentially. "How long have you been in your tent?"

"Only a little while. I built my fire—then came in to change for supper."

"Did you see a man slippin' along?"

"No."

"Did you heah any one runnin'?"

"No."

"Thank you. Sorry to have disturbed you. Well, men, we're stuck for the thousandth time."

"Cap, who is this outlaw an' why 'air you so set on catchin' him?" asked Pencarrow curiously.

"I reckon it's young Wade Holden, right-hand pard of the robber, Simm Bell. Holden is the most dangerous of that gang. One of them, Rand Blue, turned state's evidence to save himself. He wired Sergeant Pell that the gang was due to rob the Mercer bank. We frustrated that raid. In the fight we about cleaned up this gang. Only three got away, not countin' this man we're after."

"I reckon this news will go good in Houston?" queried Pencarrow with dry shrewdness.

"It shore will," declared the captain emphatically. "Politics! One party has been advocatin' a discontinuance of the ranger service. An' they shore been raggin' us."

"Ah, I see. Thet accounts."

"No, it doesn't altogether," retorted Mahaffey with temper. "A ranger is trained to ride down his man. Young Holden was the most dangerous of Bell's gang. A marvelous shot with either a six or long gun. Cold nerve. Absolutely fearless. A mere boy in years. I just cain't understand why he didn't use that rifle on us. Probably this robber with Bell was not Holden at all. That's my explanation. But I'll ride him down if it takes all summer!"

"Wal, you better have supper with us an' take his trail again in the mawnin'," drawled Pencarrow.

As their voices trailed away a clanking ring of iron against iron proclaimed supertime for the caravan.

"They've gone. He's given up—the old devil," said the girl fervently, in a low voice. "That's our supper gong. I must hurry. Will you stay right heah until I come back? It's safest. Then I'll bind up your wounds and—and we'll see."

"I'll stay," he replied soberly.

She completed the task of getting her blouse on; then she seemed struck by a thought.

"Air you—Wade Holden?" she asked.

"I wish to God I could deny it," returned Wade bitterly.

She made no further comment, and opened the tent to go out, tying the flaps behind her.

Wade was left alone, victim of contending tides of emotion and thought. He must get away that night and leave no track and go far. This girl—what was her name?—Jacqueline Pencarrow—had saved his life. An unutterable gratitude—something that waxed against his somber bitterness—welled up in Wade's heart. And he recalled his mother. That she had loved Simm Bell instead of the wandering guerrilla rebel, Jim Holden, sank deep into Wade's mind, there to be accepted.

Presently Wade felt the hot trickle down his sleeve. Sitting up, he carefully put aside the blankets and removed his coat. There was a hole in the top of his shirt at the left shoulder. The wound was just a furrow in the flesh. He must bind it to stop the bleeding. Taking his scarf from his pocket, he looked about for something to make a pad to place over the wound. He found a soft garment lying on top of the girl's open box and, folding that inside his shirt, he bound it securely with the scarf.

Then he waited for her, resisting the temptation to peer out. Apparently there was only one mess, for all the laughter and talk sounded from one direction. Members of the caravan with their ranger guests were making merry over the meal.

Light footsteps sounded outside. She had come back. Wade heard the crackle of fresh wood thrown upon the fire. A

blaze lightened the interior of the tent. Then the flaps were untied and she slipped inside with a momentary flash of firelight.

"I thought I'd never get away," she whispered. "The men are excited and the women fussing over the rangers. I fetched some pieces of meat, salt, matches, all the biscuits I could steal, and an apple. You must be hungry."

"I haven't had a bite since night before last. But I'll wait—I must tell you that I took some garment or other off your box and used it to bind this gunshot on my arm."

"Garment?—I—I wonder what," she returned, and dropped on her knees to feel around the box. "Oh!"

"I didn't look at the—the thing. It's too late now."

"No matter. You can throw it away."

Wade did not make any reply.

"Where's your other hurt?" she asked practically. "There's blood on your face."

"On the top of my head," he replied, bending it for her survey.

Gently she parted his matted hair. "Ugh!—A long groove—clotted with blood. Pretty deep. But the bullet didn't go in. It just cut," she whispered.

"That's good. I thought maybe the little brains I had were oozing out."

"Your hair is all matted. And the blood has dried on your face," she went on. "I'll get some water. I can reach the pan."

Wade sat there with head bowed. Presently she began to bathe his face and then the wound. The cold water stung but it refreshed him. The combing out of his matted locks was an ordeal.

"That's all I can do. I haven't anything to put on the cut. Where's your hat?"

"Lost. The bullet that tagged me took it flying."

"I have a sombrero," she whispered, and leaning back she reached over her pillow. "It's too large for me. Let's try it on."

"Just made for me! I won't try to thank you, Miss Jacqueline Pencarrow—And now I must go."

"Not yet. The fires are still bright. Wait!—Let's make it a good job. You lie down and rest if you can't sleep. I'll sit up and watch for the best time."

Sometime in the night Wade felt sleep being shaken out of him. He stirred. He groaned and opened his eyes. Black shadows of foliage quivered on the moonlit tent. A pale light showed the girl kneeling beside him.

"Oh, you were so hard to waaken!" she whispered. "I feared you were daid. It's mawning. They're all asleep. You must go."

Wade sat up with difficulty. "Morning! You stayed awake all night?"

"Yes. It was nothing. This is the safe time. Go!"

While she knelt to open the tent flaps Wade got into his coat to button it up. Then he found the sombrero and put that on.

"Heah. Don't forget your food and this canteen."

He received them from her, aware that her little hands were shaking. Then she moved to draw the tent flap in. A waning moon shone low over the ragged wall.

"Go to the left," she whispered. "Keep close to the wall. There are no wagons or tents. Good luck, Wade Holden."

"Bless you—girl!" he whispered huskily, and slipped out to glide into the shadow of the trees.

Then he straightened up to peer

around. The huge wagons gleamed weirdly in the moonlight. Fires were long dead. Nothing stirred. Stealthily he glided for the left wall close by, and as he moved, the tip of the moon sank below the rim of the opposite wall. He had progressed a few rods when a perceptible shade darkened the canyon. The moon had gone down. Dawn was not far away. One by one Wade passed the gray prairie schooners. The canyon opened wide, the left wall sheering south, black with timber and thicket.

He halted to breathe deep of the cold air. He gazed back toward the camp, trying to pierce the gloom and see once more that little tent and his dark-eyed savior.

Wade glided on and left no tracks.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Brasada

A T a spring which poured from a crevice in the bank Wade refilled the canteen, and then drank all he could hold. He went on refreshed, a somber and vigilant man, bent on saving his life.

Wade followed the creek to its headwaters. There in a shady spot he drank again and ate sparingly of his food. By this hour he would have traveled fifteen or eighteen miles from his starting-point. He did not know the immediate country, but he had a general idea of the direction he should take to work south of the arid slopes of the Staked Plain, a region few men ever crossed on foot. He must keep off roads and avoid the habitations of men.

He camped that night on a stream many miles farther on, and if he left

any tracks they would be obliterated by a remnant of the last great herd of buffalo.

Wade slept that night like a man whom neither pursuit nor worry could keep awake. Next day the wound on his arm burned and throbbed. He untied it and removed the bloody pad. Then he washed the wound which had healed over but was swollen and painful. Binding it loosely, he went on his way.

Three days later he entered a grassy zone despoiled by the ghastly carcasses of skinned buffalo. Hundreds lay in plain sight. Wolves and coyotes, vultures and buzzards swarmed everywhere. The stench was sickening. Soon Wade heard a distant boom, boom, boom of buffalo guns.

At sunset he came upon a camp of hunters. There were a dozen or more burly, bearded men, some dust-begrimed and bloody-handed from the day's work, others emerging wet and hairy-breasted from the creek. Wagons loaded with hides stood ready to be hauled away; horses and oxen grazed along the creek; buffalo hides pegged to the ground half surrounded the camp.

The hunters asked Wade to eat with them. A wayfarer on foot meant little to them. There were thousands of hide hunters on the Texas plains.

"Want a job skinnin' buffs or peggin' hides?" asked the leader. "Two bits a hide."

"Thanks, I don't believe I do," replied Wade, resisting a desire to accept. "Got a horse you'd sell?"

"Lots of 'em."

"And a saddle?"

"Yes. I can oblige you. How much'll you pay?"

"I couldn't afford more than twenty-five dollars."

"Sold."

Next morning Wade found himself mounted on a staunch horse with a pack of buffalo rump, biscuits, salt, sugar, coffee, and a few utensils tied on the back of his saddle.

"Where bound, young feller?" asked the buffalo hunter with a shrewd and kindly look of interest.

"West of the Pecos."

"Long ride, stranger. Cross the next river an' strike west along it. Avoid direct south. That country is overrun with hide hunters and Injuns. Leave the river where it comes out of the bluffs an' travel southwest. It's rough goin' an' water scarce. Somewhere you'll cross the cattle trail for the Pecos."

Day after day Wade rode west, always alert and keen-eyed, ever looking backward on his trail. But as the days multiplied and he never saw a settler's cabin, or a horse, or crossed a road, something began to ease off him like a gradual lessening of a burden.

The river forked at the foot of the hills. Such a beautiful spot Wade had never seen. Wonderful trees spread green canopy over glades where deer and turkey did not run from him. Wade spent a day there, cooking venison for his jaunt into harsher wilderness.

Next morning he headed away from the river, just enough south to keep to the foot of the slope. When he emerged from the river valley he saw the real Texas spread away to infinitude, gray and vast, a rolling barren of sagebrush.

Before sunset he crossed several little willow-lined threads of water, and before dark he selected a grassy swale for a camp. His camp tasks were simple. He built a fire to make coffee and heat a piece of meat. He had allowed himself one biscuit a day.

That night Wade was free of the mourning of the wolves, the yelping of coyotes. He had grown to love these sounds and felt lonesome in their absence.

In the rosy morning, when Wade took stock of his supplies, he found that he had ten biscuits left and enough coffee to last with them. He headed into the gray beckoning distance.

When those ten biscuits were gone Wade knew he had traveled ten days.

By imperceptible degrees the character of the plant life changed. From sagebrush he passed to dwarf mesquite and other thorny growths, excepting cactus which he saw rarely. The ground grew scaly with scant grass and a little mixture of sand. Wade entered this zone with misgivings. It was not the treacherous *brasada* of southern Texas, yet it might well check his progress and eventually take toll of his horse and himself.

This was a crucial moment for Wade. He could not turn back. Southward the dense growth thickened. To go north was forbidden by the barren plateau in that direction. To travel westward was his only course. Grim and fully aware of his danger, Wade rode into the brush, taking the sun for a guide.

And at once he appeared plunged into a labyrinth of lanes, aisles and glades surrounded by impenetrable thickets. He could not ride in a straight line. He had to zigzag, double upon his trail, break through thin barriers of brush, and go around.

He kept on and the sun mounted hot. From time to time he wet his dry mouth and throat, but he was sparing of his water. He rode until darkness forced him to stop. His horse went without grass and water at that mp.

Wade slept a few hours, then lay awake, a prey to worry. When it was light enough to see the opening in the thicket he saddled and addressed himself to a critical day.

The morning was cool and sweet. Wade's horse nipped at dewy tufts of scant grass and at occasional tips of bushes. The sun grew hot and by the time it was directly overhead, Wade felt it almost unendurable.

Then the brush seemed to close in on him, so that the avenues grew scarcer. This fact had one good side—the denser it grew, the closer it came to water. But he had to break through wherever that was possible. The thorns tore at his legs and the heat and dust told mercilessly upon him. As he toiled on, his thirst grew almost maddening. Half his water was gone. He took a good swallow and determined he would save the remainder for the next day.

All obstacles increased. By mid afternoon he was a ragged and begrimed man, lost in this wilderness of thorn, beginning to feel near the end of his mental and physical resources. His horse labored in distress.

By sunset a horror of his predicament beset Wade. His passion to live mounted to a frenzy. It seemed that the sun was burning a hole through the top of his sombrero. He filled the crown full of leaves. He rested in a shady place, pondering the situation. Soon night would intervene again. He decided to give the horse free rein and keep on.

As Wade pondered thus, the horse gave a snort, scattering caked froth from his nostrils, and started on of its own accord. Wade let the animal make its way through the brush. Then followed hideously long and racking hours till the sun set. Relief did not come,

so great had been the effort and the strain. Wade was fighting terrible discouragement when the horse plunged out into a wide road.

Wade stared incredulously. Cattle tracks! He studied them, here, there, across the road. He bent down in the saddle. Horse tracks! Fresh upon the cattle tracks! He deduced that a big herd of cattle had passed there a day or so before, and not later than an hour ago horsemen had ridden in the same direction.

This was the road the buffalo hunters had spoken of—a cattle trail leading to the Pecos. Wade rode on.

Sunset had not long yielded to the gloaming hour when Wade heard the ring of an ax. It made his heart leap. Then he became aware that his horse scented water. Turning a bend, he came almost abruptly upon a camp set in an opening where a creek gleamed, running over rock. A campfire blazed. Men rose at his advance.

"Hullo, thar," called out a rough voice that was a challenge as well as greeting. A burly man, gun in hand, would have blocked Wade's progress. "Niggah or white man?" he queried.

"Wait—water," replied Wade in a husky choked voice, and fell out of his saddle to bend to the stream. He drank, his horse with him, and the thought came to him that if he had ever appreciated water before, it had been nothing to this. Then he got up. The big man who had accosted Wade stood by, reinforced now by two companions.

"Come to the fire. Let's hev a look at you," said the leader.

"Reckon I'm in luck," replied Wade.

There were six in the group, all matured men, mostly lean, dark-garbed, clean-shaven, with hungry glittering eyes.

The leader stood hatless, a man of lofty stature, wide-shouldered and heavy, his visage like a crag with slits of fire for eyes and a thin hard line for lips.

"What's yore handle?" he asked.

"No matter. It changes as I rustle west," said Wade.

"Lost in the brush, hey?"

"Yes. Two days. I came from the head of the Blanco."

"Air you a buff hunter?"

"No. I'm on the dodge, if you must know," retorted Wade crisply, with an edge to his voice that did not invite undue curiosity. "I'm worn out and starved. Will you feed me? Or must I go on?"

"Stay, stranger. We got plenty of grub. An' if you're on the dodge our hand is not agin you, thet's shore."

"Thanks a lot," replied Wade gratefully, and hastened to relieve his horse of saddle and bridle. He untied his coat and pack from the cante. Then with soap and towel he repaired to the creek for a much needed wash. He removed his shirt. When he had washed it, and himself, there came a call to supper. Wade made tracks for the fire, to hang his shirt on a stick to dry and present himself with alacrity at the spread tarpaulin.

Wade ate until he could hold no more. Then, rising, he thanked his host and complimented the cook. The men appeared disposed to be friendly, except a blank-faced Texan who watched Wade with suspicion. Wade got back in the shadow away from those searching eyes and removed his heavily loaded vest to put on his shirt, not yet wholly dry.

"What about my horse, Boss?" he asked the leader.

"You're welcome to a nosebag of grain. An' there's some open patches

around where yore hoss can pick a little grass."

That solved the problem for his animal. Wade whistled at his task while covertly he watched these men. He figured them to be a band of rustlers. Wade found a little open place up the creek where some grass grew, and here he led his horse and tethered him upon it. Darkness had set in now. And he contrived to carry his saddle and pack to the same place.

Upon his return to the campfire, his footsteps made no sound on the soft road, so he heard conversation not meant for his ears.

"Another thing, Nippert. If he's on the dodge he might fall in with our plans. An believe me, with thet outfit of tough riders Aulsbrook won't be easy to relieve of cattle."

"Catlin, I know this cattle trail," replied Nippert. "At Horsehaid Crossin' we can waylay thet bunch an' never get a scratch."

"You told me thet before. But the Pecos is a hell of a long way off. An' it we do get the herd there we'll hev to sell in New Mexico. An' I don't know thet country."

"Jesse Chisum will buy every haid of stock an' ask no questions."

A low hiss from another member of the gang warned the two rustlers of Wade's approach. When he arrived at the campfire Catlin offered his tobacco pouch.

"Gosh, when have I had a smoke!" ejaculated Wade.

"Keep the bag. I got plenty more. An' what'd you say yore name was?"

"Well, the fact is, my true name makes Texans—especially rangers—a little too interested in me, so I usually go by Jim Crow or Sam Smith or some handle like that."

"Ahuh. I see. Whar you goin'?"

"I haven't any idea, except out of Texas," replied Wade.

"Friend, you got a hell of a ways to go yet, by road."

"How far to the Pecos?"

"Nip, how far to Horsehead Crossing?"

"For cattle thet depends on the grazing. This spring it's good, once out of this thicket, I'd say twenty days."

"Twenty days for cattle," mused Wade, as if impressed.

"Wal, friend, thet means twenty days or thereabouts for us," drawled Catlin blandly. "How about trailin' along with us? Plenty of grub an' good company."

"I'll sleep on your offer," replied Wade thoughtfully. "Twenty days to get west of the Pecos! Say, would I seem to give offense if I voice a thought—that your twenty days to Horsehead Crossing must have some bearing on the cattle herd which passed along here recently?"

"No offense, stranger, an' it do hev a bearin'."

"All right. I'll think it over," ended Wade. He bade them good night and strode away in the darkness.

He made his way carefully and searchingly to where he had left his horse and saddle. The glade was starlit and out of sight of the rustlers. Wade searched for another outlet to the road, and the moment when he discovered it made up his mind to leave there in the night.

With that in view, and his mind set on awakening early, he made his bed and went to sleep. When he woke up he knew he had slept long. Still the hour had not reached dawn. He had rested and so had his horse. Noiselessly saddling and bridling the animal,

Wade led him out to the road and along it for a goodly distance before mounting. Once in the saddle, he walked the horse until there was no longer any danger of the rustlers hearing hoof beats, then he urged him to a lope.



Daybreak accorded Wade the welcome fact that he was out of the brush. The road headed almost due north. Wade rejoiced that he was on it, not many miles from the famous river beyond which he would be safe.

It would be sunrise before the rustlers discovered his departure. And they would be at some pains to try to figure it out.

Wade rode on, loping and trotting by turns. Daylight came with a redness in the east. It tinged the rolling land of rock and sage and grassy plain. Again Wade saw the outlines of pale bluffs, not so vague and ghostlike this morning. Down that endless range ran the Pecos, a stone-walled river, he had heard, fordable only at long distances, a rendezvous for outlaws.

From a ridge top Wade sighted cattle grazing on a plain close to the road. Blue smoke marked the location of the camp of the cattlemen not five miles ahead. Wade urged his horse into a lope. Presently he made out riders coming in from the herd. When at length Wade reined in his horse at the camp he saw five men at their morning meal. A stalwart Texan of middle age, bronze-faced and sandy-haired, like so many Texans, rose.

"Mawnnin'," he said.

"Howdy," returned Wade.

"What's yore hurry?" queried the tall Texan.

"Reckon I wanted to catch up with you."

"An' what was your hurry to ketch up with me?"

"You're being trailed by an outfit of rustlers. Nippert and Catlin with four others whose names I didn't get."

"Wal, you needn't. Catlin is enough. Suppose you get down an' come in. We're just havin' breakfast."

Wade sat down with them, aware of covert scrutiny.

"I'm taking you to be Aulsbrook," said Wade presently.

"Thet's me. An' your name?"

"I'm not telling my right name. So you can call me what you like."

"Wal, eat yore breakfast."

Wade consumed more food and drink than minutes at this task. Then he made haste to explain: "I'm from over Blanco way. Got lost in that brush thicket. Last night I had the luck to break out in the road an' run plumb into a camp of six men. I knew their kind and I lost no time telling them I was on the dodge. That eased things. They made me welcome. After supper I overheard Nippert and Catlin talking. Catlin said I might help in the job at hand. Nippert knew the country. His plan is to let you drive in to Horse-head Crossing, ambush you there and make way with your herd. I never let on I'd heard. But when Catlin felt me out I said I'd think it over. This morning before daylight I saddled and hit your trail."

The Texan scratched his stubby chin a moment, his gray eyes narrowing.

"Stranger, when I seen you comin' I reckoned you belonged to Catlin's outfit," he drawled. "So I'm askin' yore pardon an' thankin' you for the hunch."

"Boss, how do you know this heah

hombre ain't lyin'?" queried the foremost of the tall riders.

"Wal, Bert, there's times when you have to take a man for what he says he is," rejoined the cattleman thoughtfully. "Blanco—not knowin' your name I'll call you Blanco—air you ridin' on or trail-drivin' with me?"

"I reckon I'd like to help you if I could. God knows it's time I was turning my hand to something," said Wade with a suggestion of bitterness.

"Gun throwin' yore line?"

"I'm afraid it's all I'm good at."

"Wal, on this trail it's a damn good thing, an' don't you forget thet. How about a rifle?"

"Still better. I can hit anything with a rifle," replied Wade.

"Sam, get thet saddle sheath an' forty-four in the wagon," ordered Aulsbrook. "I'm a pore shot with a long gun. An' none of my boys air extra good."

"Then you take my word?" asked Wade feelingly.

"I do, shore. How about you, Bert?"

"Boss, if I had to decide it myself I reckon I'd take him."

"Boys, any kick comin'?" queried Aulsbrook to the others.

"Nary a kick. We're daid lucky," replied one heartily.

Sam returned with the saddle sheath, Winchester, and shells which he turned over to Wade.

"Sam an' you Jim, clean up an' pack," he ordered. "Bert, you an' Blanco wrangle the hawsses. Nick, you fetch in the team an' help me harness. Pronto now."

In less than an hour the herd was on the move. Wade sat on the wagon seat with Aulsbrook, who drove in the rear. Wade's horse, minus his saddle, had an easy time with the rest of the

remuda, grazing along with the cattle. The four cowboys rode, one on each side of the herd and two behind. They lolled in their saddles and smoked. Trail-driving with leisurely work.

"I like this," said Wade. "Poking along as if there wasn't such a thing as time. Where are you bound for?"

"Colorado. I can sell for twenty dollars a haid there."

"Whew! And how many head in this herd?"

"About two thousand. All longhorns. I might sell to Chisum, if he offers a good price."

"Chisum—Jesse Chisum, the jinglebob cattle king?"

"That's the man."

"What does jingle-bob mean?"

"Haw! Haw! You air a tenderfoot. Chisum slits the ears of his yearlin's so a piece hangs down, bobs up an' down. It's a brand no other cattleman ever copied."

"Nippert told Catlin that Chisum would buy this herd without asking questions."

"I daresay he would, the old reprobate. Chisum runs a dozen outfits an' when I was at Seven Rivers last he had a hundred thousand haid on the range. He moves cattle fast."

"But doesn't that encourage cattle stealing?"

"It shore does. An' the rustlin' of cattle these days is about as big as the honest cattle business. This is the hey-day of the rustler. Why, the Lincoln County War is on right now."

"What is the Lincoln County War?"

"War between cattlemen over heah in New Mexico. Both sides air wrong. An' there'll be a heap of blood-spillin' before it's over."

"Looks like I've headed for interesting times," mused Wade.

When the riders bunched the herd on a grassy plain, Wade guessed that it was time for the midday rest. Aulsbrook drove on to meet his riders where some trees offered a bit of shade.

"Wal, Boss, I reckon it might as wal be heah as anywhere," drawled Bert, with a glint in his eye.

"What might?" retorted Aulsbrook.

"Our little set-to with Catlin. He's comin'."

Aulsbrook strode out from behind the wagon to crane his neck and gaze back along the road they had traversed.

"Wal, I don't see any hawsses."

"Boss, you're not lookin' right. Over there, off the road."

Across the grassy plain Wade sighted a dark group of horsemen and as many pack animals.

"By Gawd, there they air!" declared Aulsbrook. "Lay out the rifles convenient an' look to yore guns. They shore cain't bluff us."

CHAPTER SIX

Seven Rivers

A ULSBROOK stood out with Bert. The other riders began to open a pack, build a fire, spread a tarpaulin in preparation for a noonday lunch. Four Winchesters leaned in view against the wagon wheels. Wade sat down in the background.

The rustlers left their pack horses nibbling at the grass on the other side of the road while they crossed to halt before Aulsbrook. Hard but indistinguishable words were exchanged between Catlin and Nippert up to the last moment.

"What you men want?" demanded Aulsbrook.

"My pard, hyar, is het up about somethin'," replied Catlin, and with a sneer he turned to his lieutenant. "Now—you talk!"

Nippert was slow to move his gaze from Aulsbrook to Bert and from Bert to the other riders. He could hardly see Wade yet. But Wade had a keen eye on him.

"Wal, what do *you* want?" queried the cattleman, transferring his attention to Nippert.

"If I wanted a civil howdy I don't 'pear to be gettin' it," snarled the rustler.

"You won't get thet from us. So you might as wal ride on."

"Western custom not observed, heh?"

"Not with rustlers."

"Wal now, who'n hell told you thet?"

"Bah. We didn't need to be told. We've known for three days thet Catlin's outfit was trailin' us."

"Ahuh. So you deny bein' told?"

"Deny nothin'. I don't have to deny or affirm anythin' to you."

"Wal, then maybe you won't deny thet a young feller rode in on you this mawnin'."

"I don't say yes or no. Thet's none of yore business."

"Aulsbrook, I see his hoss. An' thet's him hidin' back there."

Wade leaped erect and in two bounds cleared the others to face Nippert in the road. He saw instantly that Nippert, drawing from the saddle, could never beat him to the gun. Catlin's attitude seemed one of intense curiosity and doubt of the issue. Only one of his men remained alongside Nippert, a small fellow with a long crooked nose and with pale blue circles under his fishlike blue eyes.

After a full moment of scrutiny, Nippert rasped out, "Sneaked away on us, after breakin' bread, huh?"

"I didn't sneak, Nippert," retorted Wade.

"Wal, you cleared out damn queer. An' I'm aimin' to make you swaller what you told Aulsbrook."

"Why you dirty-mugged rustler—you couldn't make me take back anything!" ejaculated Wade.

"Wal, you lied, whatever you told Aulsbrook. Bet you didn't tell what you admitted to Catlin—thet you was on the dodge."

"Ask him."

"I'm talkin' to *you*, young feller, an' pretty soon I'm liable to get tired of shootin' off my chin instead—"

"Take it straight, then," cried Wade in cold finality. "I heard you and Catlin talking. Your plan was to trail along after this outfit, ambush them at Horsehead Crossing, make off with the cattle and sell to Chisum without being asked any questions. That's what I heard and that's why I rode on ahead to tell Aulsbrook. Now, what do—you say?"

Nippert's harsh curse preceded his spasmodic jerk. Wade was drawing from the instant Nippert's thin lips opened. The flash of his gun caught Nippert's hand on the jerk and the terrific impact of the heavy bullet knocked him out of the saddle, sending the gun spinning. His horse plunged among the others.

Nippert's ally had drawn. But his horse reared as he pulled the trigger, spoiling his aim. Hard on that followed Wade's second shot. His adversary appeared hit, for his action broke and he could not hold the frightened horse. It galloped down the road with the rustler reeling in the saddle.

Wade menaced Catlin and the others. They had made no attempt to draw. Catlin hauled down his mettlesome horse.

"Hold, young feller, hold!" he shouted lustily.

"Catlin, I've a mind to bore you," rang out Wade.

"Wal, it'll be murder if you do," replied the rustler. "I'm not backin' Nippert. I was agin his deal. An' I couldn't change him."

"Throw him on his horse and move on with your outfit," ordered Wade. "Catlin, you fed me when I was starved. I'm remembering that now. But look out if we ever meet again."

"Hyar, men, one of you fetch Nip's hoss. An' the rest of you drive the pack train after Bill."

"Boss, Bill is down. Slid off in the road," replied one of them.

"He was a damn fool, too—I told them not to draw on this hombre."

They loaded the dead Nippert on his saddle, remounted and took the road toward the north. Watching them, Wade slipped shells from his belt to reload.

"One of you pick up thet gun," said Aulsbrook, breaking the silence. "Blanco, whatever their game was, you spoiled it, I'm in your debt."

Wade patrolled the herd during the noon hour. Aulsbrook did not appear to be in a rush. No doubt he and his riders had a good deal to discuss. Wade felt a grim satisfaction that none of them could doubt his status any longer, so far as his sincerity toward them was concerned.

Far up the road the rustlers halted and went out toward the grass, evidently to bury their dead. Wade knew where he had hit the second rustler

and that he had ridden off mortally wounded.

In due time Aulsbrook came along in the wagon, and his riders pointed the herd once more up the road. Wade avoided close contact with any of them. Once he rode out to where he had observed the rustlers congregate; and as he had surmised, they had been engaged in burying two of their comrades. The remaining four had long since trotted north out of sight.

The afternoon passed at the slow pace of grazing cattle. The riders drove until after dark before they came to water. Camp had to be pitched where firewood was scarce. Neither Aulsbrook nor his riders spoke unnecessarily that night, and Wade was not communicative at all.

After supper he said, "Boss, I'd like to stand the night watch."

"All right. You an' Nick," replied the cattleman.

Wade rode out with Nick, who asked, "Shore you've stood guard before?"

"No. This is my first crack at cattle herding. What do I do?"

"Wal, it's easy along heah. Plenty of grass. All you got to do here is fork yore hawss an' smoke an' watch. Keep the stragglers in. Ther's about all."

"Gosh! Gives a fellow lots of time to think. But I reckon I'll like it."

He rode to the far end of the herd, and drove in the few scattered longhorns. Most of them were lying down. The night was starry and cool. An intense solitude lay over the prairie like a blanket. A hum of insects enhanced the stillness. Wade listened and watched. He was sorry when relieved of duty.

By morning the strain had eased off Aulsbrook's riders and they were merry. They accepted Wade as one of them,

a little in awe, perhaps, but certainly with friendliness and appreciation. Wade met them halfway and after that they easily adapted themselves to one another.

Days passed, long, lazy solemn days, and short starry lovely nights, until Wade forgot how many lay back along the road.

He grew ever more fascinated by the country through which they were passing. In the distance it appeared a broken waste of rock and sage, but near at hand there were always flats and meadows and plains of grass. The herd did not lose weight, which pleased Aulsbrook.

At last the riders faced the long day's journey to Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos. Toward noon the grass failed and the country became more rough and barren. Wade experienced a strong excitement at his first sight of the yawning canyon of the Pecos—the famous river with few fords.

Along the road, skulls of cattle adorned points of rocks, and skeletons and dried hides littered the wayside. The hot sun glared in the faces of the riders, the dust rose in clouds, the weary longhorns quickened their step at the scent of water.

At sunset the herd topped the rise above Horsehead Crossing and ran pell-mell for the river. It was a stampede, checked only by the cool and shallow water.

Aulsbrook crossed his herd before dark and camped beyond the western bank. After supper he, and Fred particularly, appeared to be in a jovial, hilarious mood. Aulsbrook produced a black can-covered bottle from the depths of the wagon. They drank, and pressed liquor upon Wade.

"I've sworn off," objected Wade.

"But just this once, Blanco," insisted the cattleman. "Let's drink to our good luck."

"That hits me deep," responded Wade heartily. "One more, Aulsbrook, and then I'm through with the bottle."

Aulsbrook sold out to Jesse Chisum.

It was a difficult matter for a trail-driving cattleman to get past the great Seven Rivers Ranch. Wade recognized the cattle king's strategic location. Not one herd driver in a hundred could refuse a good offer after that grilling trip across the badlands of western Texas.

"Blanco, I'm takin' Fred with me to Arizona," Aulsbrook announced. "The other boys have got on with Chisum. Has he offered you a job yet?"

"No. I've a mind to tackle him for one. Never saw such a wonderful country."

"Ahu. I savvy. An' good luck to you. But let me give you a hunch. Chisum is runnin' ten outfits of cowboys. He always hires only the toughest nuts that ever forked a hawss. You won't have a bed of roses heah."

"I'll take a shot at it," declared Wade recklessly.

"Will you let me pay you wages for the month you rode with us?"

"I'd rather not take anything, Aulsbrook. The experience—my first as a cowboy—and the friendliness of you and your riders—that seems pay enough."

"As you like. I'll remember you, Blanco. An' listen, boy. Whoever you air an' whatever you've done that made you—wal, stick to the man you air *now*. Adios."

Wade watched Aulsbrook and the cowboy ride away with regret. Later he sought out Chisum.

The cattle king appeared to be in

the prime of a wonderful physical life. He was a short, square, extremely powerful man, with a broad strong face, thin of lip and prominent of jaw.

"Mr. Chisum, could you give me a job?" asked Wade.

"What can you do?"

"Not much. I can ride and shoot."

"You're the rider Aulsbrook fetched in. Blanco, he called you, wasn't it?"

"Yes sir. But that's not my name."

"Names don't count out heah. Aulsbrook told me you broke up Catlin's plan to steal his herd."

"I had a hand in that."

"You're on. Forty dollars. Go to the store an' get a new outfit. You're pretty ragged. Then see Hicks, my foreman."

"Thanks, Mr. Chisum—"

"Hell! Call me Jesse."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Ride, Pard, Ride!"

IT WAS midsummer. The camp of Chisum's foothill riders stood in the edge of the pine belt and looked out

and down over a hundred miles of silver and green New Mexico range country.

Wade thought it the wildest and loveliest spot in the world. The pines were scattered as if they had been planted to adorn a park and the cool wind at that high altitude moaned or made music incessantly. Brown mats of pine needles, tufts of nodding grama grass, purple asters and golden daisies carpeted the ground. From back on the slope a stream tumbled with white cascade here and green pool there, to brawl right through the camp site.

A belt of luxuriant grass sloped for a

few miles down to the bleached range of sage and yucca; and this belt held ten thousand head of steers, cows, yearlings, calves, all jingle-bobbed and as fat as butter. The herd required little guarding because they would not leave that zone of pure water and rich grass.

Jesse Evans's riders of Chisum's Number Ten outfit were sprawled in the shade under the pines. Their job had many drawbacks, but hard work was not among them. They had little actual labor to perform except to brand a new calf when they rode across one. They had to keep watch for Indians and rustlers.

Jesse Evans was foreman of this outfit. He was twenty years old, a towheaded cowboy with steel-blue eyes, lithe and bowlegged. He was famous for many things on that New Mexican frontier, but most notorious for his past friendship with Billy the Kid.

"Doggone it, Jesse!" Wade was complaining ruefully. "What have you got against me?"

"My Gawd! listen to thet, you fellers!" piped Jesse, lying back under a puff of cigarette smoke. "What have I not got agin you? Fust off you won't fight."

"Now Jesse, wouldn't I be a bright boy to provoke you to draw? If I have to get bored some day, as I'm liable to, I want half a chance for my life, which I wouldn't get with you."

"Huh. You're a slick talker, Blanco. I've thet agin you, too. How'n hell do I know I can beat you to a gun?"

"I know you can, Jesse."

"They always swore I could beat Billy the Kid to a gun," he went on, more seriously. "An' I reckon I could. Billy didn't think so. I hope to Gawd we never meet now he's on the outs with Chisum."

"From all I hear of Billy I'd like to see you meet."

"Don't say nothin' agin my old pard. I had to split with him 'cause he turned crooked. But I won't hear nothin' agin him."

One of the other riders, a tanned, sleepy-eyed boy, long as a fence rail, interposed with a laugh, "Jesse, you don't get enough work. You're spoiled. Stop raggin' pore Blanco. You know damn wal he's the best hombre Chisum has hired since we been with him."

"Wal, spose he is," drawled Jesse, trying to be nettled when he could not be. "He come here with all kinds of a rep as a gunman, didn't he? Shoots the haid's off all the jack rabbits, doesn't he?"

"Jesse, I'll tell you what," spoke up Wade. "I reckon we both have reasons not to bung up our good right hands. Let's have the boy tie our right arms fast to our sides and fight each other left-handed."

"With guns?"

"No. Just fists."

The proposal was hailed all around with loud acclaim. Apparently it intrigued the foreman.

"Thet's shore an idee—Naw, I'll be damned if I'll risk it. No use, Blanco. I jest gotta give up an' like you powerful. If you wasn't so mysterious you'd make a real pard."

"I wish you were all my pards," said Wade thoughtfully. "It's not my fault if you're not."

"Blanco, to stop teasin' an' honest to Gawd, you're a man after my heart," returned Evans. "An' now you lazy hombres, what can we do in the way of earnin' our wages?"

"I'm workin' right now," replied a lean cowboy, with falcon eyes on the slope.

"Aw, Jesse, what'd you git serious fer, all of a sudden?" asked another.

"Come now, Boss. Let's have a little game of draw. I got five bucks of yore's yet."

"By golly, I forgot," replied the agreeable Evans. "I'm gonna get thet back. Blanco, will you set in?"

"Not this game, Jesse. I see some dust clouds down the slope," returned Wade, gazing down.

"Boss, somethin' movin' down there," spoke up the sharp-eyed cowboy.

"Wal, Jack, you an' Blanco fork yore hosses an' see what it is. You're both always lookin'."

That little observation of vigilant eyes resulted in Jack and Wade discovering a band of Indians running off a score or more of cattle.

"They're making to go round the foothills," said Wade. "We might get a long shot, if we rustle."

"An' hev Jesse raise hell with us?"



Half an hour later they broke in upon the quiet game of the cowboys in the shade. Jack did the talking. Evans began to swear like a pirate.

"Jesse, they didn't get more than twenty haid," explained Jack.

"Hell! What do I care about the cattle? These heah robbers trimmed me out of five bucks more," yelled the foreman. "An' now we gotta ride! Doggone it, a cowboy's life is a ha—ard. Saddle up!"

Wade had often ridden for his very life. But that was nothing compared to what Evans put the posse through before they forced the Indians to abandon the stolen stock.

"Kiowas! That's the—second raid—this summer," panted Evans as his riders halted around him. "No sense in—trailin' them slippery redskins! They're gone like quail in the sage. We'll let the cattle rest till dark, then drive them back."

That raid inaugurated a busy period for Evans's riders. The Kiowas came back, to be caught in the act. They escaped in a running fight with one of their number crippled, an example of Wade's long-range shooting with a rifle.

Not long after that incident they had a brush with rustlers, when Wade smelled powder again. Evans's riders turned back from a long chase.

"Cowboy rustlers, an' don't you forget that," avowed Jesse.

"Could them hombres hev been Billy the Kid's outfit?" asked Jack.

"They could hev, but they wasn't," declared Jesse loyally. "Billy wouldn't steal from me—not in a million years."

"Wonder how that cattle war is goin'?"

"Damn tough fer McSween's side. They'll get killed, the whole caboodle of them, even if they have Billy's outfit fightin' fer them. That war is gonna take in the range."

By September the need of constant vigil relaxed. A pack train with supplies brought Evans a message to stay out through the middle of October, then drive his herd down to the winter range near Seven Rivers. These riders also brought the late gossip of the cattle war.

October ushered in the wonderful autumn season for the foothills. All

too soon that glamorous period passed; and Wade found himself trail-driving the enormous herd down to the lower ground.

It took the squad ten days to reach the Sycamore River Range, where this particular herd of jingle-bobs were to be quartered for the winter. That was within easy riding distance of Chisum's ranch. It was also on the edge of the disputed rangeland, the million acres of which Chisum declared verged upon his domain.

The cowboys threw their bedrolls and packs under the cottonwoods on the riverbank. Stoke, the cook, drove his chuck wagon to a convenient shady spot. Evans sent out three riders with the herd.

"Jack, you an' Sleepy ride in for fresh supplies. Make some excuse to hang around so you can heah all the news. Tell Chisum we're about eleven hundred haid stronger than last spring. That'll please the old devil, if anythin' can."

Wade tramped around in search of the kind of sleeping-nook that he desired. He found a sandy spot enclosed by a thicket of sunflowers and marked by a fallen cottonwood. Here he fetched his few belongings. Never for a moment did Wade forget that he had a fortune hidden inside his leather vest, and thousands more in the lining of his heavy coat.

Upon emerging from his covert, Wade espied a bunch of dark-clad riders on dark horses grouped on the river bank apart from the camp. Sauntering forward watchfully, Wade next saw Jesse talking to a youth of slight stature who had dismounted and stood holding the bridle of his horse. There was something impressive about that youth, but it had nothing to do with his battered

slouch hat, his worn garments and boots. It was the way he stood, the way he packed his gun. He wore it on the left side, in a reversed position.

"Come heah, cowboy," called Jesse Evans.

As Wade approached them he saw that Evans was pale and somehow visibly agitated.

"Shake hands with an old pard of mine—Billy the Kid."

"Howdy," said the youth in a level cool voice, extending his hand.

"Howdy—Billy the Kid," replied Wade warmly. "I'm sure glad to meet you. Jesse has talked about you a lot."

"Bet it wasn't good," returned Billy with a laugh.

Wade met and felt the clearest coldest eyes that it had ever been his fortune to gaze into. Billy the Kid was not unprepossessing. But for a prominent tooth which he exposed when he laughed, he would have been almost handsome. It was a smooth, reckless, youthful face, singularly cold, as if carved out of stone.

"Well, I can't remember Jesse ever speaking bad of you," replied Wade, choosing his words.

"Blanco, Billy has just come over from Lincoln," said Jesse hurriedly. "His outfit killed Sheriff Baker an' some deputies. Billy says he's heached of you an' he wants to talk with you."

"Hold on, Jesse," rejoined the desperado as Evans turned to leave. "It's all right with me for you to hear what I've got to say, if it's all right with him."

"Stay, Jesse," said Wade soberly.

"You call yourself Blanco?" queried Billy the Kid.

"No. That name was given to me because I happened to say that I'd come from the head of the Blanco River," explained Wade.

"But your right name is Holden—Wade Holden—an' you're the last of a gang of bank robbers?"

"I don't admit that," flashed Wade.

"You needn't. But if you're really Holden, I'm your friend an' so is Jesse."

"All right—I'm Holden," admitted Wade hoarsely.

"There's a bunch of Texas Rangers at Chisum's. They're huntin' you. They'll be ridin' out to meet Jesse soon as word arrives at Seven Rivers that he's down from the hills."

"Yes, an' that word will get there pronto," interposed Jesse grimly.

"Holden, here's how I found this out," went on Billy the Kid. "Lately I got acquainted with a Texan named Blue. Footloose, an' wantin' to get in with us. Well, this Blue is the man who connected Chisum's new gunman, Blanco, with Wade Holden. I reckon range talk drifted to his ears an' some rider who'd seen you at Chisum's described you to him. I don't know that he tipped you off to the rangers."

"But the rangers? How'd you hear about them?" queried Wade.

"Just by accident. Run into Bud Slaten on the trail. He stayed at Chisum's last night. Bud's a good friend of Jesse's. We used to ride together. He told me all the news."

"Did he say what company of Texas Rangers?"

"No. What's it mean if they get you?" asked Billy the Kid.

"Bullets or the pen—for life."

"I savvy it'd be bullets," put in Jesse Evans darkly.

"Blanco," went on Billy the Kid, as if to bury that other name, "throw in with me. Come out in the open. I've got as sweet a bunch of men as ever pulled a gun."

"Thank you—Billy," gasped Wade, sick and distraught. "It's good of you. Let me think—Why not go out in the open? Fight it out!"

"That's the talk, Blanco. Come on. Put her thar," sang out Billy the Kid, and once more he held out that slim deadly little hand.

"Hold on, Billy, damn yore pictures," spoke out Jesse, just as ringingly. "This boy has got a chance yet. It's just hard luck he was found out. Let's help him, instead of makin' it shore death."

"Blanco, do you want to fight or run?" asked Billy.

"I want to fight—But—but—" cried Wade fiercely.

Jesse Evans must have read Wade's soul.

"There's yore hoss, Blanco," he shouted. "Fork him an' ride till hell freezes over."

A shrill whistle came from the dark group of horsemen on the river bank.

"Hey, Billy. Bunch of riders comin' up the trail."

"How far?"

"Three—mebbe four miles."

"Who are they?"

"Don't know. They're not cowboys or Injuns."

"Blanco, it's your rangers. Ride! If I ever meet Blue again I'll bore him. Good-by," said the outlaw.

Jesse ran with Wade to where his horse was tethered near the thicket. Wade darted in to fetch his pack and coat. These Jesse helped tie on the saddle, and all the time he talked as swiftly as his fingers flew.

"Keep to the river bottom till you get over that rise of ground. Then take the direction of the trail, but keep off it, on the grass. Ride—but save yore hoss. Keep on, but dodge Lincoln. I'll lie like a trooper to them rangers. I'll

hold them—throw them off. Ride, pard, ride!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Wanderer

RACING his horse on through the cottonwoods, Wade looked back. Jesse Evans and Billy the Kid stood watching. They waved to him. Billy's gang of dark riders gazed the other way, then rode down the bank into the river. When Wade looked again they were all out of sight.

His powerful horse ran easily, over the sand patches and through the grass. At length he came to the end of the cottonwood growth where the land began a gentle rise except along the river. Wade rode up high enough to peep over the treetops and halted to look.

Presently over a distant ridge swept a band of horsemen, three abreast, riding in an orderly column. If they had been twice as far away he would have recognized them as Texas Rangers.

Wade urged his steed, plunging down the slope to the riverbank, and here he turned to the left and kept to the grass. Eleven thousand cattle had worked down the river that day. His tracks would be lost like needles in a haystack.

He came to where the river spread out in shallow sheets over wide sandy bars, and that place he remembered was where Jesse's herd had first come down to water. A rise of ground hid the long cottonwood grove and the range beyond. Wade rode off the trail, and keeping it in sight he set his horse to a steady lope.

After a few more miles he looked

back to find that the ridge was out of sight. He breathed freely again. Jesse Evans had detained the rangers. They would probably camp there that night or ride back to Seven Rivers.

The old trapper gave Wade a shrewd understanding look not unkindly.

"Wal, I'm goin' up in the mountains to my cabin an' put in a winter trap-pin'."

"How do you make out? Any money in it?"

"Not any more. Used to be like diggin' gold. I've seen them days. An' tradin' with the Injuns. Thet was good business till the caravans drove the redskins to war."

"Do you get snowed up?" asked Wade curiously.

"Wal, I should say. Thet's when I like it, after the crust freezes. Then I travel on snowshoes. Ever try thet, cowboy?"

"No. I'd sure like to."

"You're a clear-eyed chap. Come along an' spend the winter with me."

"By heaven! Does anyone ever come to your cabin?"

"Never hev yet. It's high up an' hard to reach."

"I'll go. I'll work without wages. But what'll I do with my horse?"

"Turn him loose up hyar a ways. There's a valley where deer an' elk winter. I can cache your saddle."

"Trapper, you're a Godsend! I'll take you up. I swear you'll never be sorry."

Once again some unlooked-for dispensation had come between Wade Holden and hate, fear, desperation, perhaps evil. High above the foothills, in a sheltered mountain valley, the old trapper led him to a little log cabin with a huge yellow stone fireplace.

With the wild eagerness of a boy

who had yearned for such adventure, Wade entered in this life in heartfelt gratitude and joy. He chopped down trees and sawed and split wood; he hunted the game that was working down from the heights; he hung up a winter's supply of bear and elk meat and venison and wild turkeys. After weeks of toil, Wade worked himself into lean hard condition.

Then the snow fell in earnest and the mountain fastness was locked in until spring. A crust that would bear the weight of a man soon formed. The trapper began to ply his trade. He taught Wade to travel on snowshoes, to bait traps and skin out the valuable furs.

Spring came. Wade followed the old trapper down out of the mountains. His horse was gone. Wade walked like the mountaineer he had become, and at Santa Fe bade his friend good-by. Wade felt himself a changed man, if not in heart, surely in appearance. He had let his beard grow and when he first looked into a mirror he did not recognize himself. He had a barber trim it. The beard had a tinge of gold that went well with his steel-blue eyes.

Wade took the stage for Taos where he stayed a day, interested in the quaint Mexican village. Then he proceeded to Lamy, which was on the railroad. Albuquerque, with its colorful Mexican and Indian life, its idle tranquil days, held him for a while. He became acquainted with a trader who had a post at Shiprock. Wade accompanied him and took a job in the post. It was far out in the desert.

He learned to like the soft-voiced Navajos. He did so well for the trader that he was sent out to buy blankets, wool, sheepskins from the Indians. He grew to love the desert with its dust

storms, its vast levels of sage and grease-wood, its purple and red-walled horizons. But the winter changed his mind. The icy wind blew everlastingly.

In the spring Wade drifted west. Always he traveled toward the setting sun. He became a sheepherder for a rancher at Mariposa and held that job all summer, sharing the work with a Mexican. In the fall they drove the increased flock back to Mariposa.

Wade spent the winter working in a lumber camp in the White Mountains, close to the Arizona line. The job was hard, the fare poor, the lumberjacks not to his liking. Another spring found him across the line in the territory that for years had lured him on. Timbered mountains alternated with sage ranges, clear cold rushing streams criss-crossed the country.

Wade traveled from one cattle ranch to another, sometimes getting a job for a while, sometimes only a meal. When he rode into White River Ranch he thought surely this beautiful place must be the one of his dreams come true. He got work as a cowboy.

All went well until the rancher's buxom daughter began to make eyes at Wade. The more he avoided the spoiled girl, the stronger became her infatuation. That precipitated the jealousy of a former favored suitor. Soon the day came when Wade once more rode away.

And as Wade penetrated this amazing Arizona land he knew that somewhere in its vast area he would find his place. He drifted ever westward and as another winter drew near, sheered to the south where the sun shone warm. Cow camps, sheep camps, lonesome hamlets all the way to Tucson held him for a day or a week, according to their interest for him. He tried odd jobs

in Tucson and passed the winter there.

Tombstone was in its heyday. Wade journeyed there. The gold fever was thick as dust over this mining-town center. It was full of gamblers, thieves, lewd women, adventurers, cowboys, travelers, besides the horde of miners. The humming town fascinated Wade. He tried his hand at mining. He struck a small rich vein from which he gleaned several thousand dollars' worth of gold dust.

Then Wade went to work in the Bird Cage, a notorious place where the populace of Tombstone flocked for entertainment, for drink and faro. Here Wade's good looks and kindness won the interest of a pretty dancer. Gossip had it that she was the property of a gambler called Monte. The gambler beat the girl. That unleashed the devil in Wade. Before a crowd in the gambling hall, he drove him to draw his gun and killed him in the act.

Wyatt Earp, Tombstone's most noted exponent of gunplay, witnessed the encounter between Wade and Monte.

"Texas gunman," he pronounced. "I don't care for any of his game."

So in the wildest town on the Arizona frontier, Wade, who had traveled under his middle name of Brandon, his mother's name, became known as Tex Brandon. And would-be killers placed Wade in the unenviable position of defending himself openly as well as from being waylaid in the dark. He crippled three men before he was forced to kill another. One spring day when the bloom was on the sage he rode away.

He spent summer and fall in the Tonto Basin and then rode up over the Mogollon Rim and lost himself in the wonderful woodlands of silver spruce and scarlet maple and golden aspen,

gloomed over by the great yellow pines.

November found him tired of a meat and salt diet, though he was loath to leave that magnificent forest. He found a winter's berth at Concha where he chopped wood and milked cows for an old widow woman who was glad to give him lodging.

Spring came again. It had a trick of surprising Wade. He counted the seasons on his fingers. Five. Five years that seemed ages since he had taken flight with Simm Bell out of Mercer!

Wade rode into a country that fascinated so greatly that he often checked his horse and sat at gaze. One vista succeeded another, with all of Arizona's multiple charms. Valleys of purple sage, watered by streams, bordered by pine forests yielded to a range of low foothills, grassy under the trees. Vast prairies of gray cedar flats stretched to the south, across which painted buttes and bluffs wavered in the air. Deep rock-walled, green-ledged canyons opened under his feet, from which the mellow song of waterfall floated upward. A wandering wall of purple rock held his gaze for long; spurs of red crags, like huge beasts, stood up out of the level. Dominating all was a group of white-spiked, black-belted mountains.

"Howdy, rider. Get down an' come in," was the cowman's greeting, gray eyes scanning Wade from spur to sombrero.

It was the open sesame of the range. There was no place to go in. But the invitation was obvious. The cowboys stood or squatted or sat about with steaming tin plates and cups. The cook, a jovial fellow of uncertain age, thrust upon Wade more food and drink than he had had in days. This outfit appeared

to be a friendly one of half a dozen riders and the two older men.

"Have a smoke?" asked the boss, after Wade had finished a hearty meal.

"Thanks. Don't care if I do."

"Where you headin'?"

"I don't know. Just riding."

"Know this country?"

"I should say not. If I had ever seen this country, I'd not have left it."

"Good!" laughed the cowman. "Yes, it's God's country. Just now rich in beef an' long in rustlers. What's your handle, stranger?"

"Tex Brandon."

"Heard of you, somewhere. Are you lookin' for a job?"

"Yes, if I could get on with a clean-looking outfit like yours."

"Sorry, we're full up. Besides my boss is leery of these lone riders. He hires only boys he knows. Takes them young an' raises them. Let me see. You could get on with Driscoll. But his outfit razzes the devil out of any new rider. Mason's foreman, Stewart, is hell to work for. Drill is always open, but pays poor wages. That leaves only Pencarrow an' he can't pay anythin'."

"Pencarrow?" repeated Wade.

"Yes, Pencarrow. He's a Texan," went on the cowman. "Salt of the earth. He dropped in on this range four or five years ago. He had plenty of money. Bought Band Drake's place—a wonderful range. Finest view in Arizona. An' he built a ranch house that hasn't a beat anywhere. Wal, before Pencarrow learned the ropes on this Cedar Range he threwed in twenty thousand head of cattle an' a couple hundred fine hosses. He had the grass, the water, an' he started big. But they cleaned him."

"Who cleaned him?" asked Wade, interrupting the speaker.

"Wal, the rustlers an' robbers an' hoss thieves. The Hash Knife got theirs. So did Bullon's Diamond B. An' every outfit of low-down riders in the country."

"You think Pencarrow would give me a job?"

"He would, if you trust him for wages."

"I'm no good with a rope or following tracks, and I can't cook worth a damn. But I reckon I'll ask him anyhow."

"Brandon, you can tell Pencarrow I reckoned he might take you on," said the cowman.

"Thanks. And who're you?"

"I'm Lawsford, foreman of Aulsbrook's three outfits."

Wade dropped his eyes to hide the flash that must have been there. What had his wandering ride led him to?

"Has this cattleman—Pen—Pen—carrow, I think you said—has he any family?"

"That's the hell of it. He's got a big family—the finest folk who ever came to Arizona. Good southern blood. Educated. Mother, grown daughter, boy and girl of fourteen. They're twins. An' two more born since Pencarrow came out here. An' from every luxury they're reduced almost to want."

"Tough!" ejaculated Wade thoughtfully. "Is the grown daughter married?"

"No. But that's not the fault of the range."

"Lawsford, how can I find this Pencarrow ranch?"

"Wal, let's see. Squat down here an' I'll draw you a map—Take a beeline across this sage flat. Go through that belt of timber, keepin' straight for the bald-faced mesa yonder. Keep round that to the left. You'll strike a canyon,

runnin' south. Follow along till you come to a trail. Go down, then turn an' go up this canyon until it opens out. You'll sure know when you get there."

"How far?"

"Reckon close to thirty mile. You'd better lay out with us here tonight an' then you could start early in the mornin'."

Wade led his horse out upon the grass and removed saddle and bridle. He spread his saddle blanket and sat down to think. He lighted a cigarette that he did not smoke. It burned until it scorched his fingers, when he cast it away.

CHAPTER NINE

Doubtful Canyon

SITTING his horse on the canyon rim, Wade tried to see clearly, reasonably, when he knew his emotions were at a higher and different pitch than he had ever experienced. All the way across the desert—for despite its warmth and luxuriance it was desert—Wade had been led by revealing steps from one beauty to another, each varying and increasing its charm, until he halted awed and rapt on the edge of this blue abyss that Lawsford had called Doubtful Canyon.

Wade wondered at its immense depth, its sheer red-gold walls, its hundreds of green-foliaged ledges where only eagles could light, its white cascades and shining pools, its murmuring melody of water and wind, its dense thicketed floor, so far down, its many rugged-mouthed branching canyons, ap-

parently as deep and large as the main one! But for its beauty, this gorge should have been called Centipede Canyon because of its many arms. This led him to the observation that all the branching canyons he could see were on the west side.

Wade rode along the rim toward the south. When he could see the canyon, deepening, narrowing, thickening its rough features in that direction, he gazed spell-bound. When the rough nature of the rim entailed detours he grew impatient to get back again, where he could look into the blue depths.

At length he came to a trail leading down. It was steep and rough, full of loose rock, and it zigzagged down weathered slopes that groaned and slid under his horse. It followed along the shady base of cliffs, dipped over descents where Wade had to dismount and sheered down and down to the thick forest of pines and maples.

What had appeared level from the rim proved to be red hills and green swales, all supporting a dense growth of various kinds of timber. It was a dark cool fragrant jungle. The trail led into a large thicket that followed the stream in both directions. Wade turned to the north. The stream was really a river, clear, amber, eddying in pools, rushing among rocks, falling over ledges.

Three times trails left the main one he was following to cross the stream. But he met with none that turned off on his right. The red rims which he caught sight of infrequently, towered far toward the blue sky. Long before Wade reached a gradual ascent, a climbing of the trail among huge mossy sections of cliff, he had succumbed to the beauty and fascination of Doubtful Canyon.

At length a different kind of running stream arrested Wade's attention. It had a strange boiling, bubbling sound. He climbed presently to a lighter part of the canyon, marked by fewer and larger pines and spruces, and a low fern-greened bluff. In another moment the trail led out upon a gigantic pool from which came that strange gurgling sound. The stream ended there. This gigantic pool was a spring, fifty feet wide, clear as crystal, mirroring the trees and the rocks and boiling, bubbling in glorious abundance from under the bluff.

He rode on and up. The trail divided, the right leading higher toward a no-longer-visible rim, the left winding gradually into open parklike country where straggling pines and gray rocks vied with purple sage flats, and timbered knolls led Wade's gaze out across the rolling grassy range toward the magnificent peaks. He had emerged from Doubtful Canyon and this must be Pencarrow's range. It satisfied even Wade's avid anticipations. And presently when he crossed a brook and rode around a clump of trees, horses appeared in the fields and he espied a long, yellow log cabin set among straggling pines on a low knoll, with the compelling panorama beyond.

He reached the knoll. A gravel road circled it and climbed it at both front and back. To the rear, out among the scattered pines, had been erected a bewildering array of sheds, cribs, corals dominated by a huge barn opening with wide doors through the middle. Wade followed the road toward the front.

It developed that this side of the knoll sloped but slightly and boasted open grassy lawn to the very sage. A wide porch ran the length of the front



of the ranch house. Saddled horses stood bridles down. Harsh angry voices greeted Wade's eager ears. A white-haired man with gestures in which Wade read passion and despair, faced booted and belted riders.

Wade's approach disrupted the altercation. He sensed an opportune arrival. The riders wheeled and stared with a sullen resentment and surprise. Fifty feet from them Wade slid off, left his horse, and walked slowly forward.

"Dad, who is that man?" called a woman's voice, rich and vibrant.

"Another one, I reckon."

Wade did not let this answer nor a faint hint of remembrance of that feminine voice swerve him from intent scrutiny of the riders. They stood close together. Two of them were young louts, marked by no distinguishing feature except viciousness. If they carried guns Wade could not detect them. The third had a leaden visage, seamed with innumerable wavy lines of age, and a sneaking eye of negative hue. The fourth possessed bold features, ugly and wolfish, emphasized by glinting eyes. These last two riders wore guns in their belts.

"Wal, Urba," snapped the third rider.

"Mebbe when this stranger gets tired sizin' us up, he'll explain his gall."

"What'd ye want?" queried the one addressed as Urba.

"Ask yourself," retorted Wade.

"Wal, I'm askin' myself to tell you to get goin'."

A young woman emerged from the open door. Wade saw her over the heads of the riders. Her magnificent dark eyes struck at his heart. He recognized the girl who had saved him, grown into a woman.

"Dad, he's not one of them," she asserted.

"They're all alike, only wuss as they come along," replied the man bitterly. He stood erect, his white locks bristling, his fine dark face drawn with haggard lines.

"You're Pencarrow," asserted Wade.

"Yes, I'm Pencarrow," snarled the rancher wearily. "What do you want heah?"

"Lawsford, foreman for Aulsbrook, sent me over. I want a job."

"Lawsford is no friend of mine."

Wade turned to the daughter and removed his sombrero. The four riders gaped from him to the Pencarrows, interested despite their resentment.

"You are his daughter?" asked Wade.

"Yes. I am Jacque Pencarrow."

"My name is Brandon," went on Wade.

"My errand here is to help your father—and you."

"Help Dad and me?" she queried wonderingly.

Pencarrow waved aside the idea as he would have this intruder. "Jackie, don't listen to him. Haven't I taken in a score of riders to be fooled an' robbed. If he's not that kind, he's only another lovesick cowhand come heah moonin' after you."

"Dad, this—this rider does not look or talk like that kind," replied the girl. "Thank you, sir, for your offer. But we can't afford to employ anyone."

"Nevertheless, I will stay," returned Wade with the force of a man who could not be denied. "Naturally your

father has lost faith in men. But you are young and keen, Miss Pencarrow. Trust me. At least enough to tell me if these four riders are not enemies of your father."

"Indeed they are!" she flashed passionately. "They belong to Band Drake's outfit. He cheated Father—and has never ceased to make demands since. They came heah this time—"

"Shet up, gurl, or it'll be the wuss fer yore old man," interrupted Urba with a vicious scowl.

"Thank you, Miss Pencarrow," said Wade swiftly. "That's quite enough. I'll step aside now and let these men take up their argument with your father."

"You will, huh?" demanded Urba. "Wal, what'n hell is to prevent me from bootin' you out of hyar?"

Wade laughed in the man's face and deliberately backed away to one side.

"Pencarrow, my boss is out of patience with you an' I'm losin' mine," said Urba insolently. "We came after thet thousand you owe Drake an' we're gonna get it."

"I don't owe Band Drake a dollar," replied Pencarrow wearily. "I paid him twice the haid of cattle thet he left heah."

"Thet's yore story, Pencarrow. Drake's word is as good as yore's in this country. An' as there ain't any court or law to pass judgment it comes down to man to man. Yore cowboys hev quit you an' thet looks bad on this range. It'll go agin you."

"Quit me? Most of them were thieves in cahoots with these rustlers. The others hadn't the guts to stick to a cattleman who was good to them."

"Say, Pencarrow, you made a crack before thet riled me," declared Urba. "Are you castin' a slur at me?"

Pencarrow appeared too disgusted to

reply to that. He was a sorely beset man, losing his grip on himself.

"Pencarrow, are you gonna pony up?" queried Urba impatiently.

"If I had thet much money I'd never give it to Drake."

"Wal, yore hosses, then. We looked them over. An' I reckon them an' the bunch of cattle we cut out will square this little debt."

"No!" thundered Pencarrow, growing livid.

"Dad! Control yourself," implored his daughter.

"Aw, Urb, ain't she a pippin'?" drawled Urba's lieutenant. "Look at them eyes. An' them heavin' breasts!"

"Wal, I guess," retorted Urba with a guffaw, and he walked halfway up the steps to leer into the girl's pale face. She shrank but did not flinch. "Jacque, I reckon you might save yore dad—"

Her supple body moved swiftly as her arm swept out. The resounding blow staggered Urba and almost upset him. His hand at his bloody lips, he glared up malignantly. But the white fury of her checked his utterance.

"Get out of heah—before I shoot you," she cried. "My father knows all about Band Drake. He's a cheat and a thief. He's worse—as I could tell. And you and your crew are his low-down tools!"

"Ahu! You hell-spittin' cat! So you come clean with all the old man hadn't nerve to say?" rasped Urba brutally, and then he shot a baleful gaze up at the rancher. "Pencarrow, we're takin' yore hosses an' thet bunch of cattle. An' by Gawd! you better have a care of thet white-faced slut!"

He strode out with clinking spurs, his head still turned to the rancher, until he collided with Wade who thumped

a hard left hand on his chest, shoving him backward.

"You've had your say. Now hear mine!" commanded Wade.

Urba stood there, strangled with rage.

"Jackie, get in the house!" yelled Pencarrow shrilly.

The girl backed away from the steps and inside the door.

"Bill—!" Urba yelled. "This hyar hombre—"

His comrade dropped his hand toward his weapon. Wade's gun leaped and belched in the same instant. Bill fell against one of the other men who supported him a moment, then at a sucking terrible intake of breath dropped him like a sodden sack.

"Urbl!" he screeched in warning, where now no warning was needed. He and his comrade slunk aside, ready to run but afraid.

When Urba took a backward step he almost tripped over the prostrate Bill. Urba had turned a ghastly white. Wade held his gun low. It still smoked.

"Urba, I'd have shot you along with your pard," said Wade in cold scorn, "but boring daylight through you isn't enough to pay for your insult to Pencarrow's daughter."

Wade swung the heavy Colt across Urba's mouth, knocking him flat.

"Man, don't—shoot!" bawled Urba, spitting blood from his mangled mouth. I'll crawl! I take it back! 'Pologize!"

"Pull your gun or I'll murder you."

"No! I ain't no gun slinger. Wait, Brandon—wait!"

As Urba got up heavily, Wade prodded him in the abdomen with the gun.

"Hold—Brandon," panted Urba in a horrible earnestness to save his life. "We'll leave cattle—hosses, I'll squeal on Drake. His orders—An' he means

to git the gurl—one way or another. I'll tell everythin'—only give me—"

Wade deliberately cocked his gun and then jabbed it at Urba, who doubled up in mortal terror.

"Don't!—damn you!" he shrieked. He tripped and fell backward and as Wade jabbed at him he dragged himself along the gravel road toward the horses.

"No use, Urba. Yo're done. But pull your gun," called Wade, and he kicked the ruffian over backward.

Urba bellowed with pain and sprang up, with enough manhood left to draw his gun. Wade shot him in the act.

"Here you fellows," shouted Wade, wheeling to the stunned riders. "Pack these men away from here."

The two broke into action. They led Bill's horse up to the porch and flung him over the saddle. Then they fetched Urba's horse and did the same for Urba. Next they got their own horses and mounted.

"Listen," said Wade, "I know your faces. And if I ever meet you again, guns or no guns, I'll take a shot at you. Savvy? Tell your boss, Band Drake, that Urba squealed on him. Tell him to steer clear of Tex Brandon. Now rustle."

Wade watched the gruesome procession until the pine trees obscured it from sight. Then, released from stress, he slowly walked back toward the house. Pencarrow, who had stood through all this, sat down on a porch chair as if it was relief to get off his legs. White agitated faces appeared inside the far door, and as Wade reached the porch, the girl emerged from the other door just behind her father. Wade took a step up and addressed the rancher.

"Well, Pencarrow, this Arizona is a wild and hard country for a decent Texas family."

"My God, it is—an' bloody," replied the Texan. "An' I chose the wildest range in the whole damned territory."

At that juncture a manly lad of fourteen came thumping up in his bare feet. He was fair, like his father, showing little resemblance to Jacqueline.

"Mister, I heahed it all," he burst out, "and I saw you shoot the darned skunks."

"Did you? Where were you?" replied Wade.

"I was in the sitting-room with Ma and Rosemary and the kids."

"Why didn't you come out to back me up?" Wade said in fun.

"I wanted to. But Ma held on to me. And besides, Pa won't let me have guns."

"We'll have to talk your Dad out of that," said Wade seriously.

"Jackie," interposed the rancher. "Will you tell Mother that everythin' is all right out heah now? Take Hal with you."

"Aw, I want to stay," remonstrated the boy, as his sister led him away.

Wade said, "Pencarrow, you're a Texan. It's odd that you keep guns from your boy. Doesn't seem like Texas to me."

"His mother's fault. The boy's uncle was a gunman. Glenn Pencarrow. Killed by rangers. She has always hated guns since. That's one reason why I've failed heah."

"Does your daughter share that feeling?"

"You heahed her, stranger. An' I'll bet she'd have shot that bastard if you hadn't."

Jacqueline returned. "Dad, I've calmed them somewhat and sent them out of the sitting-room," she said. "Hal will look after Mr. Brandon's horse. Let us go indoors."

Wade followed them into a large and well-lighted room, with windows looking out upon both sides. It was richly and colorfully furnished. A huge open fireplace, with Navajo designs on the stones, took Wade's eye.

"Heah, take this chair, stranger," said Pencarrow hospitably. "Brandon? Was that what you called yourself?"

"Yes. Brandon."

"Where you from?"

"All over the West. But I was born in Missouri. They call me Tex."

"Ahuh. Daughter, would you mind leavin' us alone?"

"I certainly would. What's more I won't do it," replied the girl with spirit. "Heahafter, I'm going to sit in on all the deals."

"Well! Well!" ejaculated the rancher. "You're as much of a rebel as Hal. Brandon, this is my eldest—Jacqueline—just turned twenty-one."

"How do you do, Miss Pencarrow," rejoined Wade, with a bow.

"Brandon, your Arizona has ruined all of us," went on the rancher.

"I couldn't think that," replied Wade with strong feeling. He meant to revive the courage and hope of this Texan. "You're far from old. You still have plenty of fight left. And Miss Jacqueline here—well she didn't strike me as being ruined. The lad Hal has fire and spunk. If I judge the rest of your family by you three I'd be willing to gamble on it that you'll find success here."

"Excuse my curiosity," the rancher said, "but who told you about me?"

"I happened to ride into Lawsford's camp and asked for a job. I reckon he liked to talk. Mentioned the few cattlemen of this Cedar Range, among them Aulsbrook. Then he spoke of you and your family, how you'd been robbed by all the outfits in this country."

"Ahuh. An' that is why you rode over heah to ask me for a job?"

"Pencarrow, it struck me that I might be the kind of man you needed."

"Hal thet struck me, too, most damned hard. But air you shore it wasn't talk about Jacqueline thet fetched you?"

"Oh, Dad," interrupted the young woman, blushing furiously.

"Lawsford's cowboys did gossip about Miss Jacqueline—most flatteringly. But I had made up my mind to come before I heard them."

"An' you run plumb into some of Band Drake's outfit! Wal, Brandon, I didn't take kindly to yore comin'. But I'm thankin' God you stayed in spite of my insults."

"Dad, evidently Mr. Brandon had determined to get that job," interposed Jacqueline.

"Brandon, I'm ashamed to admit that I can't pay my bills in town, let alone wages," said the rancher.

"Never mind wages," rejoined Wade hastily. "I've saved a little money. I had good luck at Tombstone. Struck a rich gold pocket and dug up a few thousand. Then I gambled a little—and won. I'll lend that money to you."

"See heah, Brandon. The boot is on the other foot now. You don't know me," said Pencarrow.

"Mr. Brandon!" exclaimed Jacqueline. "How could we accept anything like that!"

"Brandon," said the rancher, "you look over my ranch. See what's left. Figure if I have any chance on earth to retrieve. An' if you think I have, I'll accept the loan of yore money an' give you the job I see you're fitted for an' which is what I need more than money or stock or riders."

"Thanks, Pencarrow. I'll do my best."
"Heah's my hand."

CHAPTER TEN

Cedar Ranch

PENCARROW paced the floor like a man coming out of a daze. "Brandon, when you killed those men it was as if lightnin' struck through the blackness of my despair. I never felt such joy."

"Oh—Dad," cried Jacqueline tremulously. "We mustn't grow savage."

"We can't live in Arizona an' turn our other cheeks to every blow. Jackie, I'll go tell Mother thet the first blood spilled on our ranch has turned the tide. You talk to Brandon."

Wade, left alone with the girl, found himself staring at the floor, conscious of a sweeping tide of emotion.

"Mr. Brandon, did you lie to Dad?" Jacqueline asked, her voice low.

"No," he answered abruptly, and for the first time he met her gaze fully. Her great dark eyes searched his.

"Then you—did not come heah—because of me?"

"Yes. And your father—all of you. I have no ties. Your plight appealed to me."

"You explained it that way. But I—I doubted you. I have been deceived so often. Tell me frankly—wasn't it because of me? Because of the vile range gossip—the name these wild riders have given me—that I'm a—a—heah for the taking?"

"Miss Pencarrow, please—"

"You deny it?" she interrupted.

"Absolutely. I made up my mind to

come before Lawsford's cowboys mentioned you. Then, to be fair to them, they did not speak insultingly—they talked only of your charms, as cowboys do round the camp-fire."

"Thank you. That makes all the difference in the world," she returned fervently. "I've had a hideous ordeal heah in Arizona. Dad's first outfit of riders had to be discharged one after the other for their attentions to me. To tell the truth, they were hounds. Band Drake was the worst—he was the cattleman Dad bought our land from—gave me an undeserved name on this range. Oh! I've been torn apart heah!"

"How in the world did you come to stay?" asked Wade.

"That's the strange thing. We all love this Arizona. It wasn't only that all we had was sunk heah. We were very happy at first. The youngsters went wild—and I guess I did too."

"Who is Band Drake?"

"He pretended to be many things he wasn't. Dad fell in with him at Holbrook, where we lived awhile. Drake sold us this land which he and his gang had homesteaded, but had never proved up on it. He ran Dad's outfit and ran off most of the cattle in the bargain. He made life miserable for me. Dad had to drive him away. And I haven't taken any horseback rides since, except near the ranch house."

"What does he look like?"

"Tall, fair, rather good-looking. He must be under forty. Claims to come from Texas. But enough about him—Mr. Brandon, haven't I met you before?"

"What!" ejaculated Wade with a start.

"You seem strangely familiar—somehow," she went on. "It struck me a moment ago. You know the vague

groping sensations one has trying to remember a name or a face. It's gone now. I guess I'm a little out of my haid."

Wade experienced intense relief. A tumult stilled within him. She did not recognize him. And he was able to look at her, smiling as if at her mistake. She flushed slightly and averted her eyes.

How beautiful she seemed! Her hair was wavy, between brown and chestnut in hue, with glints of gold; her face a lovely oval with wide low level brows, magnificent eyes that looked black, but were deep dark velvet hazel, a straight clear-cut profile and strong sweet lips, curved and red.

She caught Wade in his absorbed survey of her and got up to walk to the door, then hurriedly left it as if the scene outside brought back the tragedy. She had a lithe grace that the cotton gown and apron failed entirely to hide. Her sleeves were rolled above the elbows of round brown arms, and her shapely hands, supple and strong, showed traces of flour.

"I was baking when the four range cavaliers rode up," she said with a smile.

Wade grasped that his study of her had not displeased her, but was being prolonged too far.

"Miss Pencarrow, forgive me for—for staring," he said hastily. "I forgot my manners—but you are so wonderful-looking."

"Thank you. But wait till you see Rona!"

"Your sister?"

"Yes. Hal's twin. She has not a trace of Spanish. My mother was a Castilian. I resemble her somewhat. But Rona favors Dad's side of the family. She has the towhead of the Pencarrows. And such eyes! Like light-colored violets. The strangest shade."

"Then I'm afraid I've tackled quite a job. You see, women have not entered my life since I was a boy. Then it was only my mother and sister."

"You never had a wife?"

"Me! Good heavens, no! Nor a sweet-heart—not anything."

"Mr. Brandon, can you expect me to believe that?" she asked incredulously, "You are young, handsome. You have the deference for women so seldom met with in this West."

"No matter what I have or haven't. It's the simple truth. For years I've known only the wilderness and rough men. What little time I've spent in towns, I was too busy just staying alive to think of other things. Someday, maybe, I'll tell you my story. But let us get back to the reasons I am here. It seemed to me that your father and Aulsbrook were not good friends."

"Indeed they are not," she retorted quickly. "And it's not Dad's fault. Out heah, if not in Texas, Dad has seen the necessity of being on good terms with neighbors. But Aulsbrook hated him in Texas and hates him worse heah."

"Why?"

"They both loved the same girl. My mother."

"Oh, I see. What bad luck they should choose the same range! Has Aulsbrook been a square neighbor?"

"Hardly. He is a shrewd man. Dad has not the haid for any business, much less raising cattle. Aulsbrook took advantage of that."

"Was he crooked?" queried Wade sharply.

"Morally, yes. But not in the way a court would see it."

"How much stock has your father left?"

"We don't know. Not much compared to what we started with. We have left

about a hundred haid of horses, some very fine stock. And perhaps a few thousand haid of cattle."

"Have you been living off them?"

"Yes. And off the ranch. We raise everything we eat. We have a wonderful farm down in the canyon."

"I rode by the big spring. That must be on Pencarrow's range."

"It is. And has caused us much trouble. Aulsbrook claims it. Has threatened Dad with suit in Phoenix. It's that sort of thing—and debts—pressing debts, which have troubled Dad even more than the rustlers. Sometimes we never know of a cattle steal until long afterward. All our riders are gone."

"I take it you look after your father's books."

"Yes. And I'm ashamed to look in them."

"You must go over them with me presently."

They were then interrupted by the entrance of Pencarrow, leading a dark woman who had once been very handsome and still had distinction. Following her came the boy Hal with a tall girl unmistakably his sister. She had an abundance of hair so light as to almost be silver and eyes of a shade of blue that Wade had never seen. When Pencarrow introduced Wade, both the mother and daughter welcomed him, the former shrinkingly as if he were a bloody monster, and the latter gladly as if he were a savior.

"Rona saw the whole show," piped up Hal, "and then she keeled over."

"Mr. Brandon, I never fainted before," said the girl apologetically. "I was tickled to death when you jumped at that Urba. But the bang of your gun and that other fellow's awful face—and the blood—I just got sick and dizzy, and everything went black."

"Don't talk any more about it," ordered Pencarrow. "Your mother is still sick an' dizzy—an' she only heaved the fight. Brandon, we'll have some lunch, an' then Hal can ride about with you while the womenfolks fix up one of the cabins for you. Hal, fetch his hawss around."

The dining-room, like the living-room, looked out upon both sides of the house. The furnishings and tableware attested to Pencarrow's prosperous days. Wade ate heartily but he was glad to get outdoors again. He found that he could hardly keep his eyes off Jacqueline, and Rona watched him as if utterly fascinated.

The ranch buildings had been erected too recently to be run down, but they showed the lack of use. Bunk-houses and cabins were empty, as were the cribs and other sheds. The huge barn was a superb structure with twenty-five stalls on each side of the wide space that ran from end to end. There did not appear to be any hay or grain on the place. The corrals had not been used for a long time.

At a whistle from Hal, a score or more of horses came trooping up the pasture field. They took Wade's eye.

When Wade rode out with the rancher and Hal he felt the same thrill as when he had emerged from the can-

yon to get his first view of the ranch. No wilder or more beautiful setting could have been found. Its fragrance of sage, its gray and green vastness, its many pine-crowned knolls, its grand mountain wall on the north, and its gateway, like a window opening out upon the painted desert—these were largely responsible for the hold the country had on the Pencarrows.

Wade saw perhaps two thousand head of cattle, and was of the opinion that Pencarrow had more stock left than he supposed. He asked about the winter climate, to be satisfied that the cold and snow offered no serious obstacle to successful ranching.

"There's a big open canyon over heah where you could throw more cattle than I ever owned," Pencarrow said.

"How far to the railroad?"

"Five days herd-drivin' an' good grass an' water all the way."

"Any ranchers along that route?"

"Not one. An' a queer thing, too."

"How many cattlemen living off this Cedar Range?"

"Aulsbrook, Driscoll, Mason, Drill, an' a few homesteaders."

"This range is big. But how big?"

"Thunderin' big, you bet. It's more than a hundred miles long an' half as wide."

"Any idea how much stock?"

"Yes. Aulsbrook claims he's runnin' ten thousand haid. An' the other three ranchers might throw together all their cattle into thet big a herd."

"Only twenty thousand cattle on a range that'd support a half million! With the price bound to climb! Pencarrow, you can make a fortune here in five years."

"I could have. Damn me, suh, I could have," bellowed the rancher, touched



on a sore spot. "I saw it. But I've been deceived, outfigured an' robbed."

"If you have two or three thousand head left we can double them in a couple of years. And double that in two more."

"But I haven't got so many left, an' I'd need more cows, new bulls, an' riders."

From that moment, Wade began to think too deeply to ask more questions or even to attend strictly to Pencarrow's further statements. Upon their return, they unsaddled at the barn. Hal turned the horses loose in the long lane that led to the pasture. Pencarrow told Hal to show Wade to his cabin and then left for the house.

"Mr. Brandon, I'm doggone glad you came to Cedar Ranch," said the boy heartily.

"Well, Hal, I'm pretty glad myself," replied Wade, warmed by the lad. "Suppose you cut out the 'mister' and call me Tex."

"Tex? I like that. Will you take me riding with you?"

"Say, boy, your lessons begin tomorrow."

"Lessons? Gosh!—I have one hour a day with Jacque in summer and three in winter," complained Hal.

"Fine. But I mean lessons in riding, roping, branding, tracking—and handling guns."

"Oh, Mist—Tex! You mean it?" ejaculated Hal.

"I shore do."

"*Whoopie!*" yelled Hal.

They had reached the little cabin at the edge of the first pine-clad knoll. Jacqueline emerged from the open door to confront them on the porch.

"What are you whooping about?"

"Tex is gonna make a cowboy out of me."

"Tex?"

"Yes. Mr. Brandon. But he won't let me call him mister."

"Oh, was that it. Well, Tex has taken another hard job on his hands," replied the girl demurely. "Mr. Brandon, heah are your quarters. Will you step in?"

Hal ran toward the house whooping for his sister. Jacqueline stood in the door of the cabin, bidding Wade enter.

"Dad built this cabin for his foreman. But it never was occupied by just one man. Mother and I fixed it up in a hurry. It's quite nice, don't you think? Cozy and light. Running water and open fireplace. There's a shed full of cedar and juniper wood through that back door. Table and lamp are still to come."

Wade took one survey of the interior with its pine-wood furniture, its colored blankets and Indian rugs, its big stone fireplace, its several pictures and shelf of books, and then he laughed outright.

"For me, Miss Pencarrow! This wonderful little cabin? . . . It is far too good. If you could see the holes I've lived and slept in!"

"All the more reason why you should have some little comfort heah."

"If you say I must—"

"I never saw Hal so happy. He's excited, of course, as we all are. Your introduction was upsetting. Dad insulted you and I—well, I took you for another of these loose range Romeos."

"You had reason to take me for worse."

"No! That was fear. I should have felt you were the—the man I prayed for—to come—to help Dad."

"Did you pray? Well, now," replied Wade weakly, as he sought in vain for words to hide a sudden bursting flood of emotion.

"Oh, I'm *glad* you've come, Tex Brandon," she cried.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Drop That Gun!"

WADE was alone at Cedar Ranch. He had seen all the Pencarrow's, in wagon and buckboard, drive off for Holbrook, a transformed and happy family. He had watched them go with a deep conviction of the good that would come to a man if he had faith and hope enough.

They were to be gone six days or a week. Wade had lent Pencarrow close to \$7,000, money he had earned through mining and won by games of chance. The rancher was to pay his long-due debts and buy food supplies, ranch tools, saddle equipment, rifles and shells, and many things for his needy family.

When they were out of sight, Wade barred his door, and cut open his worn leather vest and coat to get out the ill-gotten fortune that had been a burden all these years. What must he do with many thousands of dollars stolen from express trains and banks?

First he must hide the money. What a relief to be free of the feel and the awareness of that burden! Temporarily he hid his father's wallet and the rolls and packets in the woodshed. For a permanent hiding-place he concluded to make a strong tight box and bury it under the cabin floor.

Leaving the cabin, Wade packed a rifle he had borrowed from Pencarrow. He constructed a makeshift sheath for the rifle and tied it on his saddle.

He also carried pencil and note-book he had obtained from Jacqueline. Thus equipped, he set out to ride the range.

He rode west to West Canyon and along that rim for a mile, clear to where it headed out upon the range; and he sighted a good many cattle, of which he jotted down an estimated count. Then he rode in a circle along the edge of the slope where the purple sage met the green timber. The ride itself would have been all-satisfying without his search for cattle and study of the range. He covered fifty miles that day, and was well pleased with the stock he had seen in the canyon and among the brushy thickets.

Next day Wade turned to the east and covered even more territory, with as gratifying result. He mapped the distinctive landmarks and got the lay of the land, tasks that came as easily to him as if he had been a cowboy all his days.

On the third day he rode the vast gray rolling tableland between Cedar Canyon and the desert. He gained an eminence from which he could see all over the range, down into the canyon, and out upon the desert, a remarkable lookout point on the summit of a pine knoll. With a good field glass he could cover the whole range.

On the return, Wade rode around one of the many knolls to encounter at some distance three horsemen whose appearance tallied with riders of Urba's ilk, and whose actions upon being discovered proved that their business at the range looked doubtful. At sight of Wade they sheered off toward the canyon.

Wade dismounted, and jerking his rifle out he began to shoot. The range was too far for good marksmanship,

but he could see where his bullets cut up the dust in open patches in front of the horses. From a lope these riders broke into a dead run and were soon out of range. They halted at the slope of a knoll and watched Wade.

He reloaded the Winchester and then, leading his horse, he walked to the spot where the riders had so quickly halted at sight of him. He knelt and measured the tracks of their horses and studied each minutely.

He backtracked the riders for several miles, until he was satisfied that they must have come up out of the big canyon. Then Wade made for the ranch house, arriving there after dark.

Next day he set off early, meaning first to call on Pencarrow's nearest neighbor, a homesteader named Elwood Lightfoot, who had located in a big brake of Cedar Canyon on the west side and adjoining the land claimed by Aulsbrook. Wade was particularly interested in this homesteader because Hal and Rona claimed he was their one friend, and because Pencarrow said Aulsbrook had been unable to drive or buy him off.

Once Wade found the trail he came out upon the brake in short order. It was a shallow valley walled by red rock, level and green, bisected by a shining brook, and jumping off into the green void below.

Wade rode down. The homesteader's log cabin stood in the open, at the north end, no doubt built there to get the southern exposure and shelter from the northern winds in winter. The cabin was small, crude in structure, with a yellow chimney built outside and a roof of earth from which weeds and sunflowers grew.

Rabbits, quail, chickens, deer and burros appeared to have the run of the

ranch at that end. The barking of chained hounds announced Wade's arrival. Then a man emerged from the cabin, a lean gray old fellow.

"Howdy. Are you the feller Hal was tellin' me about the other day?"

"Howdy yourself. Yes, I'm Tex Brandon. And you're Elwood Lightfoot."

"Pile off. I'm achin' to shake yore hand."

"Let's get in the shade and talk. I'm sure as glad to meet you. The Pencarrows have gone to Holbrook for a much-needed trip. Pencarrow had debts to pay and supplies to buy. And it was a chance for his family."

"Doggone! I'm shore glad. An' terrible curious. Where'd the money come from?"

"I lent some to Pencarrow. I made a lucky gold strike at Tombstone and doubled it by gambling. There's big money to be made on this range. And I'm going to help him."

"Wal, if you don't mind me sayin' it, your killin' Urba an' his pard was a helluva good start," remarked the homesteader, his penetrating gaze hard on Wade. "I heahed about it thet same day. It's gone over the range like fire in grass, an' it's seepin' down into the brakes to the dens of rustlers an' hawss thieves an' bad eggs."

"Good news," replied Wade, waving that aside. "Hal and Rona swear by you. Their only friend! Are you Pencarrow's friend?"

"I shore am, more'n he reckons. I've had hell keepin' this homestead, which I'd sold long ago but for his two kids."

"Good. We're for Pencarrow and his youngsters, then?"

"I'll go as far as you can," retorted the homesteader. "I've been on the point of borin' one of these hombres for a long time."

"Band Drake, I'll bet."

"You bet, I hate him because I used to see Miss Jacque often. She'd ride down to visit me. She's afeared to come any more."

"Ahuh. We'll get around to Drake later. Tell me, Lightfoot. Do you own this homestead?"

"Yes. I proved up on the land three years ago. But didn't get any patent until last fall."

"Looks like a productive ranch?"

"Say, Brandon, things grow heah as if by magic."

"What was your original idea when you homesteaded this land?"

"I saw the value of the water. Then I wanted to farm the land, 'specially alfalfa, an' run cattle up on the range. Been heah nine years, an' am poorer now than when I started. The rustlers got my stock, so I quit raisin' alfalfa."

"How much alfalfa could you raise here?"

"A hundred tons a summer, an' never hurt my garden or orchard."

"Whew! No wonder Aulsbrook has been trying to get your place. Now, Lightfoot, here's a most particular question. Do you know cattle?"

"Do I? Wal! From A to Z. I've worked cattle for forty years."

"Lightfoot, you've just told me Pencarrow's fortune is made, and you and I are trailing along behind."

"Man alive! Brandon, how'n hell do you figger that?"

"Pencarrow has the range. You have the experience."

"Shore. I figgered that out myself long ago. But it'll take money. An' guts an' the power to kill or drive off these rustlers an' thieves hidin' down in the brakes."

"My job, Lightfoot!"

"Hell, man! You alone agin a dozen

outfits, some of them bad. It cain't be done."

"It can be done!"

The homesteader stared mutely at Wade.

"Are you with me?" queried Wade sharply.

"Wal, if you want to know, I haven't felt so happy in years. To hell with obstacles an' difficulties! The harder the job, the madder we'll get."

"You'll take me as a pard then on sight?"

"I shore will. I've felt somethin' big in me tryin' to bust ever since Hal was heah."

"Elwood, I mean you will never regret this. Now that's settled. Let's get our heads together."

"Wait a minnit. I've got a condition Brandon. An' it's that you let me be the dark horse in this race—the silent pardner in this deal."

"Why? I don't like that idea."

"Wal, as a matter of fact, all I can do is to be a kind of scout for you an' advise you on matters that pertain to cattle raisin'. The brunt of this turrible job will fall on you. All I want is to keep this homestead an' make it pay a little for my old age."

"Elwood, we can make it pay more than that. Alfalfa alone will yield you a good income. You must have help."

"I know a Mexican and his son. Sheepherders. They've been done out of work by these thievin' riders who hate sheep. I can get them for their keep until we begin to produce. That'd give me time to scout for you."

"Scout? You mean ride the range and the brakes to get tab on these parasites?"

"Yes, more than that. To find out where the stolen cattle goes—the stock they don't drive to the railroad. I've al-

ways stood in with some of these outfits. My idee is to keep on apparently as I've always done—by never takin' sides."

"Seen from that angle it's a fine idea," replied Wade.

"We gotta go slow. No quick improvements heah. An' to throw in new stock up on Cedar Ranch would be fatal until you get these hombres scared or on the run. For the present it's a big enough job to round up all Pencarrow's stock an' get it back in the open. A thorough search of brakes an' timber might fetch surprisin' results."

"I've already proved that in only four days."

"You might run across some of the stolen cattle. Reckon I can guarantee thet. But you'll need cowboys. There's the rub heah. Riders thet won't steal you out of hide an' hair! Riders thet'll ride fer their keep until we get on our feet! Brandon, I reckon it's impossible."

"Give me a few *young* riders. I don't care how lazy, ornery, tough, crooked they are. I believe I could build up an outfit. I've got to, Elwood! I've lived among bad men, outlaws, outcasts. Every last one of them had some good in him. I'd work on that principle. All the same I'd be a hard driver. I'd shirk no job myself. Then I'd tell them I'd shoot whoever made a false move—and I'd do it!"

Lightfoot rose slowly to his feet. "Brandon, I know the outfit you want," he declared forcibly, and he cracked his big hands together. "Doggone! It's shore queer how things work out—when the right man shows up."

"Elwood, you're saying a lot without telling me anything. Come on. Explain," returned Wade in eager impatience.

Lightfoot resumed his seat. "Son, a year or more ago a cowboy rode down heah, bad shot up. I took him in without askin' questions. An' I pulled him through. He was about the likeablest cuss I ever met. We got to be good friends. Wal, his name was Hogue Kinsey an' he come from a good family down below Ashfork somewhere. His father had a couple of bad years with drouth thet most cleaned out his cattle. They got pretty pore. Hogue had a sister he must have been plumb fond of. She fell sick an' to get her into a less high an' cold climate, Hogue stole a bunch of cattle an' sold them. Thet must have been several years ago. Anyway he got found out an' had to leave home.

"If I'd had any money to hire thet boy, I could have saved him from livin' off this range. As it was I kept him heah a while an' then he drifted over Pine Mound way, where he hangs out with half a dozen boys slated for hell. They're stealin' cattle but in a two-bit way thet's not botherin' the ranchers yet. I reckon his outfit have stole a few haid from Pencarrow. But I'll add this in Hogue's favor. He's the only cowboy I know who never rode up to Pencarrow's door an' asked for a job."

"How do you account for that?" queried Wade.

"Wal, I reckon Hogue hasn't become hardened yet. He wouldn't ride for a cattleman an' steal behind his back. He remembers his sister an' mother too wal to be a cheat to the Pencarrow girls."

"Where is Pine Mound?"

"About thirty miles across country by trail. Much further by road. All the outlaw outfits buy their supplies there, loaf an' drink an' gamble there. Fights an' killin's common."

"Locate the trail for me and I'll ride over there tomorrow," said Wade. "Can you get your Mexican friends here today?"

"I can call them from the rim. They live in a log shack not far from heah."

"Well, call them. Tomorrow you come to the ranch and stay until I get back."

The dawn broke gray, and soft, with a redness streaking over the sage. Bird and beast of the wild were out in force, scarcely moving to evade the approach of the fast-trotting horse. By the hour the sun rose Wade had descended into Dry Canyon and had found the trail.

The head of Dry Canyon closed almost abruptly with a jumble of splintered and weathered cliffs, through which the trail climbed in zigzags and loops. Once out on top Wade faced a slow descent through timber and sage.

Wade could not have exercised more hawk-eyed vigilance had he once more been in familiar flight from pursuers. He saw the flash of the wings of birds far ahead, the movement of brush, the gray rump of a deer entering a thicket. Whenever he came to an open flat or a long line of trail ahead or the descent of a slope, he slowed his horse and took distrustful measure of rock and bush and tree.

A few squatters' cabins, and then a long-unused sawmill, and at last a ranch in a green valley, told Wade that he was approaching Pine Mound. At last he saw down its long wide street, with its irrigation ditches on the outskirts and lines of cottonwood trees, leading to the center of the town. Sleepy was the word to describe Pine Mound. Wade rode half the length of the street before he saw horses at the

hitching-rails, a couple of muddy-wheeled wagons, and several rough-clad men who stared curiously as he passed by.

A few more pretentious structures, old and weather-stained, and some sign of bustle and life, persuaded Wade that he had reached the center of Pine Mound. Dismounting he tied his horse and then clanked stiffly into a high sign-board-fronted merchandise store. Wade saw one woman and several men being waited upon. Then he was accosted by a sloe-eyed individual whose bland smile could not hide his curious interest.

"Mawnin', sir. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Brandon, from Cedar Ranch. Pencarrow's new foreman. Called to make acquaintance."

"Brandon! You're the—Aw, yes. Pencarrow. We used to do business with him. Fact is, he still owes us a little bill."

"Yes. He sent me to pay it. I'd be obliged if you'll make it out."

"Glad to, New foreman, eh? Pencarrow on his feet again?"

"Solid. But he's not asking for more credit. From now on he'll pay cash. I'll drop in again after I get a bite and a drink."

Wade strode out, aware that his presence had been noted and commented upon by the other occupants of that store. He strode down the gravel sidewalk. The old buildings were constructed of stone and adobe, and the newer ones of clapboards, some with the bark still on. There appeared to be only one other large store, which Wade entered. It contained a stock of merchandise similar to that of the first, only the amount was small by comparison. A proprietor or clerk sat by the

door, tipped back in a chair, smoking a pipe. Wade accosted him without preface:

"Do you know Pencarrow?"

"No. I never had no dealin's with him. I set up here after he quit buyin' in Pine Mound."

"Pencarrow will be buying again. I'm his new foreman, Brandon."

"How do. My name is Hicks. I seen you come out of the Mormon store."

"Morman, eh? Who runs it?"

"Jed an' Seth Bozeman."

"I take you for a Gentile."

"You're takin' correct. An' here's where you should deal. They've got aplenty of trade without newcomers to this range. An' they'd just as lief you didn't drop in."

"I savvy. By the way, Hicks, have you heard what happened out at Pencarrow's?"

"Nope. Ain't heard a thing for a coon's age."

"I shot Urba and one of his gang."

"Urba! Hell you say? Brandon, you won't be popular here."

"I'd rather be unpopular. Does Band Drake hang out here?"

"About half the time, I reckon. Most all winter, anyway."

"And Harrobin?"

"Wal, he's here most of the time when Drake isn't."

"They don't get along together?"

"Huh. Not so you'd notice it."

"Hicks, I want you to be a friend of Pencarrow's and mine. Savvy? I'll drop in again."

Wade found a little restaurant, conducted by a jolly fat Mormon where good cooking, no doubt, accounted for a motley group of drivers. Wade looked them over while he ate, and he concluded that a couple of cowboys and a backwoodsman out of the round dozen

occupants might be given the benefit of a doubt.

"Ridin' through, stranger?" inquired the proprietress, as Wade paid for his meal.

"No. Just scraping acquaintance," replied Wade in a voice that carried. "I'm Brandon, Pencarrow's new foreman."

"Glad to meet you. Come again," she concluded heartily.

"Sure will. You're an awful good cook, lady."

Wade went out assured of the fact that the name Brandon had struck hard on the ears of most of those men.

Pine Mound boasted more drinking-dens than stores. The largest had a crudely painted white mule on the high board front.

Wade entered as if looking for someone. The saloon was like hundreds of others he had seen in the West, only there was a vague difference that did not come from the odor of rum and tobacco, or from the half score of noisy men lined up at the bar, nor from the rude drawings and letterings on the whitewashed adobe wall, nor from the card tables and gamblers at the back.

No one paid particular attention to Wade, from which he deduced that his arrival in town had not yet been noised about. But not improbably a loud argument among the gamblers kept attention from the entrance of a stranger.

At the moment two cowboys, young and lithe, with guns swinging and spurs jingling, their lean faces hot and hard came striding forward, evidently in a hurry to get out.

"Rustle, you two-bit brand blotters!" called a harsh voice. "An' from today you stay out of Pine Mound!"

"Come on Hogue," called one of the cowboys, over his shoulder.

"I'm damned if I will," came the reply, ringing shrilly.

As the group at the bar, silenced by this row, moved back, curiously, Wade intercepted the two cowboys to whisper coolly in their faces, "Don't show yellow!" And he spun them around to pass ahead of them.

Wade was among the foremost of the curious onlookers that crowded back to the gaming-tables. Some had been vacated by players, at others the gamblers stood up, their heads craned toward a group at the rear table. Wade saw a handsome flaming-faced youth confronting five men, three of whom were standing.

"Harrobin, you can't drive me off this range," he declared hotly.

"Look here, Kinsey," retorted a dark-bearded man who sat at the table, his hands covering a stack of cards and chips. "I've warned you before. You and your outfit will rustle or take the consequences."

"But what have I done? Sure, you owe Jerry an' me money. An' we don't happen to be Mormons—"

"Cut that kind of talk," interrupted Harrobin. "If you'd done no more, you talk too much. Men get shot for that on this range."

"I daresay they do—in the back—or when they're not packin' a gun, as I'm not," flashed Kinsey scornfully.

"Once more I warn you."

"Aw hell! I'm not afraid of you, Harrobin. If I had my gun I'd call you right here an' now."

"You talk too much."

"Talk? Hell, you talk, everybody talks. When I told Band Drake—"

"Shut up!" hissed Harrobin, moving as if to sit back a little from the table.

Wade was swift to seize the opportunity

made for him. He leaped out to draw his gun.

"Hold!" he yelled. Then cold, measured menacing he continued: "Don't move, men! Careful, Harrobin!"

From a violent start the Mormon froze stiff. He had drawn his gun or had a hand on it under the table.

"Don't shut up, Kinsey," went on Wade curtly. "Your talk was damn interesting to another Gentile, one Tex Brandon. Go on!"

"Thanks, stranger," the cowboy rejoined quietly, his young face paling. "You bet your life I'll go on. Harrobin, take this in your teeth. You're sore—you're tryin' to hound me off this range—because I told Band Drake about the herd of C. R. Bar cattle you got penned in Green Canyon."

Harrobin turned livid under his dark scant beard.

"Much obliged, Hogue," rang out Wade. "C. R. Bar cattle. That's Pencarrow's brand. And I happen to be Pencarrow's new foreman. Go on!"

"Aw! Reckon thet'll be about all," drawled the cowboy.

"Harrobin, I want that bunch of C. R. Bar cattle," demanded Wade.

"Kinsey's a liar," hissed the Mormon malignantly. "No one will believe the sneaking lout. He and his two-bit outfit have run off Pencarrow stock themselves. I know. I've bought it."

"That so, Hogue?" queried Wade.

"Sure it's so. Who hasn't run off Pencarrow cattle? The fool rancher kept no riders to brand his stock. I never drove off a hoof that wasn't a maverick. An' in Arizona a maverick belongs to the man who brands it."

"Harrobin, you stand corrected. I reckon you're the liar," snapped Wade.

"Brandon?—That your name? Pencarrow's new foreman, eh?"

"Drop that gun on the floor," Wade ordered.

"What gun?"

"The gun you have in your hand."

"You're mistaken. I've no gun."

"Do you think any man with a gun in his hand could fool me? Drop it!" thundered Wade.

Harrobin was not yet intimidated to the point of complying. His gaze betrayed a calculation of chances as opposed to releasing his gun. The instant Wade read that conflict of thoughts he took swift aim at the Mormon's right arm and pulled the trigger. The heavy Colt filled the room with booming crash. A trenchant silence ensued. It was broken by the thud of a gun striking the floor.

Wade placed his foot against the table and gave it a tremendous shove. Table, cards and chips, chairs and men went down in a thumping heap.

"Kinsey, get outside," ordered Wade, beginning to back away, keeping the group covered. "Harrobin, I proved you a liar about your gun. Well, throw it pronto if we ever meet again! Because I'll know then what I suspect now—that you're a cattle thief!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Things Look Up

SAY, just who are you?" drawled Hogue Kinsey, as Wade, leading his horse, halted under a wide-spreading cottonwood tree on the outskirts of Pine Mound. "I shore want to shake your hand—an' thank you heaps."

"Dodge the thanks."

"What'd you say your name was?"

"Brandon. Tex Brandon."

"An' you're Pencarrow's new foreman?"

"Yes. An' damn glad to meet you, Hogue."

"Wal, I'm glad too. I kinda like you, Tex. The way you laid it on to Harrobin! Thet was great. But out here, after it's over, wal, I don't feel so good."

"Why not? We're going to be friends."

"Thet so? You heard me tell Harrobin about Pencarrow's mavericks?"

"Forget it. That's past. We've all done some bad things we're ashamed of. I have. Hogue, you're through training to be a rustler."

"Hell you say!" retorted Kinsey.

"Yes. . . . You were on the way. But I'm checking you up. . . . you're going to be my right-hand rider. You're going to persuade your outfit to throw in with me. I'll whip them into the hardest-riding, hardest-shooting outfit in Arizona. You weren't cut out for a cattle thief. You've just drifted. Well, I don't need to tell you where you were drifting. But one thing you didn't know—any more than Harrobin or Drake—and that is you were due to run up against a new deal—a chance to square yourself—to turn honest and stay honest. We'll retrieve Pencarrow's losses. We'll make his fortune. We'll clean out these pack-rat nest of rustlers. We'll hang Harrobin and Drake!"

"My—Gawd!" gasped the cowboy.

"How do you like the prospect?" flashed Wade.

"It takes my breath, Brandon. Lord, if I only could—But Pencarrow! I stole from him."

"Boy, Pencarrow's a Texan. Salt of the earth. You'll love him. You'll start right by telling him straight. Then that'll be the end of your two-bit rustling game, Hogue."

"I've heard of the Pencarrow girls. Never seen them. But I'd shore be afraid—"

"Listen, cowboy. Wipe off your mind whatever rotten range gossip you've heard. Think of this. You'll be riding, fighting for two of the truest finest girls who ever came out here to make the West a better place."

"Damn it! Brandon, you're makin' me a better fellow than I am!"

"Nope. I just know what's in you, Hogue. Shake hands."

"Brandon—I hope—you're not too late," Hogue replied brokenly.

"Never too late. I can tell you that. Now, Hogue, what about this outfit of yours?"

"Wal, it's not exactly an outfit. Bunch of us been livin' together in an old cabin over here. Pretty sick of livin' on beef. An' just about ready for anythin', I'd say."

"When can I talk to this outfit?"

"Right away. Jerry an' Bill are waitin' for me. I'll call them, an' we'll ride out to the cabin."

Before the hour was gone Wade had presented his offer to Kinsey's comrades. The nature of it, the way Wade put it, had the same effect upon four of them that it had had upon Kinsey. Rain Carter, a silent man, thin-lipped and shifty-eyed, manifested a slow amaze-

ment, a pondering thoughtfulness, but no excitement. His youth lay behind him. The others were all boys under twenty, and one by one they shook hands with Wade, awed by his force, yet ready to burst into whoops.

"Carter, you're an older man," said Wade curtly. "I see you've got more to wipe out than these boys. But my offer holds for you. Only think well what you're doing."

"I been thinkin', Brandon," returned the other; "I'll be ridin' my hoss over somebody's toes. But let 'er rip!"

"One last word, fellows, and get me straight," said Wade uncompromisingly. "I'm giving you a chance to be honest—to escape the noose! For that's what'll come to Arizona rustlers pretty pronto. I'm guaranteeing you work, board, horses and outfits, guns. And if you stick you'll be paid for your services. But if any one of you ever double-crosses me he'll get the same I'm going to hand out to these rustlers."

"Pards," spoke up Kinsey, "put thet in your pipes an' smoke it. I'm grabbin' this chance like a feller who's bogged down in quicksand, when you throw him a rope. An' I say to one an' all of you—an' you 'specially, Carter, if you're not shore—good an' straight shore—duck this deal right here an' now."

Carter sat with his head bowed, silenced if not visibly pale and tense like his comrades. After a moment's trenchant pause, Kinsey turned to Wade.

"Boss, it's a deal. May you never regret it!" he announced, coolly. "An' here's an idee thet just popped into my head—let's rustle down to Meadow Canyon an' drive thet herd of Pencarrow's back to his ranch. Harrobin will be nursin' thet sore arm an' his grouch for a few days. Some of his outfit are away."



Wade was on his feet in excitement. "Hogue, by heaven, what a great start!" he yelled. "Boys, we're off. Tie on your belongings. You'll never come back to this scurvy shack."

Four days later, before sunset, a long stream of tired dusty cattle filed into the lower end of Pencarrow's fenced pasture. And seven tattered, grimy riders on lame horses wended their weary way toward the ranch house and the cabins.

Two heavy-laden wagons, one of them new, and a buckboard, had come along the road parallel with the lane, accommodating their movements to the slow walk of the riders. This was the Pencarrow caravan returning from Holbrook.

A wild whoop from the driver of that new wagon greeted Wade's ears and wakened him from utter exhaustion to a glow of delight. That yell emanated from Hal Pencarrow's lusty throat.

"Boys, we're a scarecrow outfit," said Wade with a laugh. "But we needn't be ashamed to meet the Pencarrows."

But Hogue Kinsey was the only one to follow Wade across the green square to the ranch house. When Wade saw Jacqueline stand up in the buckboard to let the reins fall and stare with great dark wide eyes, he felt the glory of a victor returning from the war. He did not look up again until he reached the wagon, when he stiffly dismounted and hobbled to the porch where Pencarrow stood.

"Brandon!" tolled out the rancher sonorously. "Is thet you?"

"Yes sir, it's me," replied Wade. "We must be pretty black and crumby. No wash, no bed, no grub—nothing but dust and meat these last five days. I have to report, sir—"

"You shore look it. Never saw such ragamuffins!"

"I have a report to make, sir," went on Wade. "I just drove in four thousand head of cattle. Rough estimate. Most of them are yours. Harrobin rustled them from time to time. He kept this herd in Meadow Canyon. I lost a few on the way."

"Four thousand—haid!" gasped Pencarrow hoarsely. "Harrobin! Oh my Gawd! An' what's all the stock I saw as we come up the valley?"

"I drove the brush and canyons. Accounted for about thirty-five hundred head."

"My cattle?"

"Yes, sir. You can count on around eight thousand head."

"Man! How'd you do this?"

"I made the acquaintance of this cowboy, Hogue Kinsey. He and his outfit of five riders threw in with me."

Kinsey clinked up beside Wade and removed his sombrero.

"Mr. Pencarrow, I reckon I want to come clean right here," he said. "Brandon got me out of a bad scrap over at Pine Mound. He had to shoot Harrobin to do it, but not fatally, I'm sorry to say. I an' my pards have throwed in to ride for Brandon. He got me an' my pards to see the error of our ways. But I've appropriated a lot of your mavericks in the past. I want thet understood."

"Brandon, what's he aimin' at?"

"Kinsey did not need to tell you," returned Wade. "But I'm glad he did."

"Wal, it does count with me—thet he told me," replied Pencarrow huskily. "Brandon, I'll heah all these particulars later. I confess I'm—saggin'. My laigs air weak as my haid."

Rona Pencarrow came running to her father. "Oh, Dad! I think he is

wonder-full!" she cried, hugging Pencarrow's arm.

At that instant Kinsey turned and saw Rona for the first time. Their glances locked. Rona and Hogue became oblivious to the others.

Jacqueline came forward. "Rona, come with Dad," she said, her rich voice unsteady. "Mother has hysterics. Brandon, wait please."

They went down the porch toward the living-rooms. Wade turned to the stricken cowboy.

"Hogue, come out of your trance," he said, "and go fall in the watering-trough."

Hogue jerked up without a word and hobbling to his horse he took up the bridle and went plodding toward the bank. Wade sat down on the porch and Hal Pencarrow plumped down beside him.

"Tex, what you think? I drove that new team and wagon Dad bought all the way from Holbrook."

"Hello, Hal. You did? Well, by golly! I'll want to hear all about that drive."

"It shore was hell. Took us four days. I'll tell you—and I shore want to heah about your cattle drive. Did you see Jacque's face when she stood up in the buckboard?"

"Not distinctly, Hal. Why?"

"Tex, we're all kinda dumb Texans—Dad all over again. But not Jacque. She's part Spanish. And if you do something that pleases her—something hard to do—Oh! what you get!"

"Hal, did you have—a good time in town?" asked Wade, catching his breath. He was not in any condition to face what Hal intimated.

"Did we? My—gosh!" ejaculated the lad. "I heahed Jacque say Dad didn't owe near so much money as he thought. He was so happy he just beamed. Rona

and me—we just went loco. We got sick from eating stuff. I coaxed Dad out of a cowboy outfit, a .44 Winchester and a Colt .45. Dad was tickled when I told him I'd have to ride with you. But when Ma saw the guns she went into a conniption fit. We bought out all the stores, made lots of friends—gosh! the way these fellows tumble before my sister!—and we came away leaving two thousand-odd dollars in the bank. Tex, we owe this trip and all to you. If I cain't tell you how we feel, by gosh! Jacque can."

Light quick steps behind Wade and the sense of a dynamic presence sent his blood surging.

"Hal, drive the buckboard down to the barn," said his sister matter-of-factly. "Then hurry back to unpack the new wagon."

"I'll be back pronto," chirped Hal, leaping up to run to the buckboard.

"Miss Pencarrow, let me help," said Wade, rising as if his legs were no longer dead.

"Brandon, in the future we will dispense with the *miss*," replied Jacqueline, and she came close to him to look up with soft glad eyes. "Your beard is all matted. You must be daid on your feet."

"I reckon—I was," replied Wade unsteadily.

"You must go to your cabin and clean up. I'll send some supper over to you. We fetched back a cook and a maid—a nice fat Mexican woman and her daughter."

"That is just fine, Miss Pen—"

"Jacqueline," she interrupted.

"Oh, yes—Jac—que—line. Please don't send me any supper. I'm too tired to eat."

"Some hot soup. You must have some nourishment. Go now. I'll fetch the hot

soup myself. I feel I could do anything for you."

"You overrate my—my service. It was my duty—my work. What else have I done?"

"What *have* you done?" she flashed, and taking hold of the dusty lapels of his coat she gave him a little pull that was a shake as well, while she leaned to gaze up at him. Her breast just touched his, but enough for him to feel the quick swell of hers.

"Yes, what have you done?" she went on, after a long pause, during which her eyes wrought havoc in him if they had not already done so.

"Dad is in there crying like a baby—unmanned as I never saw his misfortunes unman him. 'Eight thousand haid of cattle,' he repeats, 'an' cattle sellin' at thirty dollars, an' goin' to forty. An' I reckon I was ruined.' Mother is crying with him—happy for him and for us children. And as for *me*—oh, Tex Brandon, what haven't you done!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Echo From the Past

CROSSING the green to the cabin in the afterglow of sunset, Wade lingered on his porch, wondering if that golden light was not unreal, if the strange buoyant elation that had dispelled his fatigue was not another illusion.

Jacqueline Pencarrow, even more than her father, was generous and impulsive. She was still only a girl, and the visit to town, so long after isolation, with its rapture for the children, had stirred her

deeply. Then to return home—find thousands of the Pencarrow cattle back on the range, to see her father break down—these were enough to make any girl forget herself. A smile, a word of rich feeling, a glance from her devastating eyes—these Wade felt must not be taken as intimate, as something peculiarly intended for him, because he had made her happy. Then he tried to dismiss the ecstatic sensations she had aroused in him.

A rustling step arrested his thought. "*Agua caliente, senor,*" came in soft accents, and a Mexican maid set a pail upon the step.

Wade went in to take a hot bath, a luxury he had not indulged in for so long. His mind seemed gradually to lose its whirling activity and to slow toward oblivion. He was asleep almost before he got under his blanket.

When Wade awakened, the afternoon sun shone through the door he had forgotten to close. On the table stood a tray with dishes. This puzzled him until he recalled that Jacqueline had told him she would bring something for him to eat. She had entered his cabin to place the tray there, and she had found him in a dead slumber.

"Boss, are you gonna wake up?" called Kinsey's slow voice. "You've slept seventeen hours."

"Devil I have! Come in, Hogue, I sure was dead to the world."

The cowboy entered, his lean young face smooth and glistening.

"Hogue, hand me that tray," said Wade, sitting up. "I'll eat my last night's supper for breakfast. What's on your mind, cowboy?"

"Boss, I shore hate to be a quitter," replied Hogue with difficulty. "But I'm askin' you to let me go."

"Hell no! What's the matter?"

"Who was thet tow-haired girl with the big eyes?"

"Last night, you mean? Rona Pencarrow."

"Did you see her look at me? Did you hear what she said to her dad?"

"Yes. She's only a kid, for all her height. Hogue, she was grateful, half beside herself. All's clear ahead of you, Hogue."

"Will you let me go?"

"Hogue!—I savvy. You hadn't met Rona when you came clean to Pencarrow—admitted you had been a thief? Then, seeing that swell kid, hearing her defend you—it kind of shamed you?"

"I reckon thet's it—Boss," replied the cowboy.

"But you could not have done a finer thing. You can stand up now, and look any man in the eye—or any girl, even as fine a one as Rona Pencarrow. For in that act you got back all you had lost."

"Brandon, you make me see things clear," replied the cowboy ponderingly. "I'll deserve what you think of me or die tryin'. But don't forget I asked you to let me go."

"I will forget it," rejoined Wade earnestly. "Rustle back to the barn and round up the boys. I'll be there pronto."

"Boss, I forgot to tell you thet Lightfoot has been lookin' over the herd we drove in. Where does he come in?"

"Good chap, and sure a friend of ours. Cotton to him, Hogue."

After the cowboy stalked out with his clinking step, Wade sat gazing through the open door. "Doggone," he soliloquized. "That boy is a straight shooter."

Later Elwood Lightfoot met Wade to tell him bluntly, "Good job. We'll loose

hell on this range. Those rustlers have it so easy an' are so rich they can afford to hold cattle for fattenin'. I never heard the like of thet in all my ranchin'. Brandon, act pronto now. Cut out all the steers in thet herd—upward of two thousand an' all out on the range, an' drive them to Holbrook an' sell. Thirty dollars a head is worth more than two birds in the bush."

"Old-timer, thanks for your second hunch. I'll pull that trick this very week."

"Pencarrow 'pears like he used to be. An' the twins! My Gawd, how they've bloomed overnight! Brandon, you've started wonderful. But you will be a target for all the sneakin' riders Drake an' Harrobin have. Never forget thet. Keep in the open. The timber an' canyon trails mean death to you. If they can't kill you pronto, they'll sic a gunman on you."

"Have they any of those in their outfits?"

"Hard-shootin' riders, yes. But Band Drake is thick with the only real gunman in eastern Arizona. His name is Kent. He's a bad man. Hangs out at Holbrook. Brandon, you see an' smell danger. We've got to give you a terrible reputation, an' set tongues to waggin'. I'll do thet. I can ride in on every outfit an' talk. An' I'll claim to have known you back in Kansas when times would make riding this range a picnic. All to throw the fear of death into these rustlin' hombres."

"Go as far as you like."

"I'll be ridin' home now. See you soon, mebbe tomorrow."

"What about buying more cattle—that new stock to build up our herd—But never mind now. Think it over. So long, Elwood."

Wade went out to take up the work

at hand—so many tasks beside the great one, care of the herd. Pencarrow ordered the cowboys to report at the kitchen for their meals. He asked Wade to eat with the family, saying the invitation came at Jacqueline's suggestion.

"Thanks, indeed. But I had better eat with my outfit," replied Wade soberly.

Early and late he drove the cowboys, and the harder he drove them, the better they liked it. They took avidly to Wade's plan to develop a notorious outfit.

The morning arrived when they were to start the big drive to Holbrook. Wade designated Jerry and Rain Carter to remain on the ranch and to keep the cattle out of the brush. Hal Pencarrow had been given his first job for Wade—to drive the wagon. With a gun at his belt and a rifle on the wagon seat the lad was in a transport. But he affected a studied pose of *sang-froid*.

Wade had seen the girls every day, though seldom to speak to. This morning before mounting his horse he approached Jacqueline, whose intent eyes kept him restlessly aware of her presence. She stood at the living-room door with Rona.

"Rona," said Wade, "promise me you will not ride while we are away or stray far from the house."

"Yes, I promise. But why?"

"There will be risk from now on."

"Of what?"

"Bad riders hanging around the ranch."

Rona did not seem impressed. Wade turned to Jacqueline.

"Jacqueline, you will not ride while I am gone—and stay close to the house," he said.

"Is that an order or a request?" she queried with a tilt of her chin.

"I am—just telling you," replied Wade, frozen by her cool query. He divined the only possible way he could have offended, and that was to refuse the invitation to eat with the family.

"Are you my master?" she asked with somber, unfathomable gaze upon him.

"Jacqueline, it would not be safe," he replied hurriedly.

"Why not? I hate to be cooped in. I love to ride."

"Because I have enraged these rustlers who lived off this range. Lightfoot told me they will hang around in the woods. They might kidnap you or Rona. Think how awful that would be! I told your father, but he left it to me."

"Indeed. How sweet of Dad! And what are you going to do about it?" she challenged.

"I can only appeal to your intelligence, your good sense, your loyalty. Your dad has a new lease on life. A misfortune like that would ruin him, and it certainly would wreck the plans I've made for him."

"Oh, I see. You think a great deal of Dad, don't you?"

"Yes, and of all of you."

"Brandon, I would do anything you asked me to," she replied without flippancy.

"Oh! Thank you—that relieves me," returned Wade. "Good-by." And he turned to Pencarrow, who came out of the house with a packet of letters.

"How long will you be gone?" added Jacqueline.

"I don't know. We'll hurry. Believe me."

"If you meet John McComb give him my regards. He was very nice to Rona and me."

"I shall not forget," replied Wade.

"Letters to mail," said the rancher.

"Here's three lists. Mine, Mother's and the girls'. Sell for the best price you can get. Buy complete outfits for yourself an' your riders, not forgettin' the Winchesters an' shells you mentioned. Heah's my bankbook. Deposit to my account. An' rustle back, Brandon."

Wade made the drive to Holbrook in five days, a quick uneventful trip, without loss of steer or any appreciable weight of beef.

He found that his fame had preceded him. And he further stirred gossip and conjecture by stalking into saloons and gambling-halls silently, but apparently bent on meeting some particular man. That night in the office of the little hotel he had some pertinent things to say about Band Drake and Harrobin.

The herd of cattle brought \$9600. Wade kept out six hundred and banked the rest.

"Boys," he said to the eager brown-faced quartet of riders, "here's some hard-earned coin, your first wages. But as you see, hardly enough to go on a toot. Remember now, Tex Brandon's outfit is on trial. Be on deck early in the morning to help me buy rifles, shells, saddles, bridles, spurs, boots, sombreros, clothes, bedrolls, and whatever else we need."

Wade kept Hal with him, to the lad's obvious pride. Before that second day was gone Wade had met John McComb, a young merchant of the town, a dark, good-looking, likable Westerner.

"Miss Jacqueline sent her regards to you," Wade managed to get out.

"She did! That was kind of her," ejaculated McComb and he blushed like a girl.

Wade readily saw how the wind lay in that quarter and it gave him a queer sickening qualm.

Late in the afternoon Wade and his riders started back on the return trip. He let Hal ride a horse and he drove the wagon. They were a merry party. They camped at a spring near the road and feasted on a broiled wild turkey Kinsey had shot from his saddle.

Next day, with the loaded wagon, the cavalcade could make only about twenty miles. On the following morning they started at dawn, intending to reach the ranch by night.

With the riders ahead of the wagon and Kinsey in the lead, under strict orders to keep sharp lookout, Wade drove ten hours at a stretch, and then, where a rocky brook crossed the road, they halted to rest and eat. Starting again in an hour, they ran out of the solid timber into the patches of oak and pine that dotted the gray range. The ranch was already in sight and the party was passing a thicket when two whiplike rifle reports, one close after the other, cracked out. Wade saw the puffs of white smoke. Hal's horse was shot from under him and a bullet knocked Wade off the wagon seat.

He lay on the load of supplies stunned. Still he heard shrill yells from the cowboys and a volley of gunshots, then the crack of ironshod hoofs over rocks. Hal's pale face appeared.

"Oh, Tex! Are you bad hurt? There were two that we saw. They hid behind the bushes—shot from their horses. Kinsey and Marshall chased them, burnin' powder—"

Bilt Wood joined Hal. "Boss, where'd they hit you?"

"Creased my head—it burns—I'm dizzy. Call Hogue back," replied Wade, with sight waning. Then all went dark for him.

When Wade regained consciousness, it was dusk and he was being carried

from the wagon. Excited whispers, a girl's low cry, Pencarrow's deep voice told him where he had been taken. The cowboys laid him upon a couch. Someone lighted a lamp. Blood dripping down over Wade's forehead kept him from opening his eyes, and an impulse, of which he was perfectly conscious yet did not understand, kept him from speaking.

Pencarrow put a heavy hand on Wade's breast.

"He's alive. Heart all right," he said in gruff relief. "What a bloody mess! Fetch water an' a towel, somebody."

"Dad, they shot my horse from under me," spoke up Hal importantly.

"Hal," called Jacqueline, from the head of the stairs, "have the cowboys come back from town?" Then when the lad failed to answer her, quick footsteps sounded descending to the hall, entering the living-room. "Dad! What has happened?—Who—"

"It's Tex. He's been shot. We're not shore how bad."

She reached the couch. Wade felt her before she touched him. "Oh, my God!" she whispered low. Her hands fluttered on his head. "Where?—Show me where it—" She parted his wet hair. "It's—here," she went on, with agitation. "No hole, Dad! A long furrow—I feel the bone—smooth all the way."

"Wal now—that's fine," exploded Pencarrow thickly.

Wade decided it was time to relieve them further. "Jacqueline, will you make sure my brains are intact?" he asked clearly. "I can't dispense with any and hold down this job."

"Oh!" cried Jacqueline, startled.

"I'm rather used to gunshots," said Wade mildly. "Will you please wash the blood out of my eyes?"

Presently Wade was able to see and

the first face happened to be Rona's. She smiled gladly.

"Tex, you weren't so careful as you made me promise to be."

"Rona, I sure wasn't."

Jacqueline asked Wade to raise his head. "Iodine. It'll hurt."

"I don't believe coals of fire would hurt at this moment," replied Wade lightly.

"Indeed you are not badly hurt," she said.

"Boss, you had a narrow squeak," interposed Bill Wood. "I'll mosey along now with the horses."

"Where's Kinsey?" queried Wade, suddenly remembering.

"Last I seen of him an' Kid Marshall they was shore pullin' leather after them two hombres."

The cowboy clanked out. Jacqueline finished bandaging Wade's head.

"Thanks. I'll go to my cabin now. Hal, will you lend me a hand?"

"Brandon, you will stay right here where I can look after you," said Jacqueline. "Hal, pull off his boots. Rona, fetch a blanket and pillow."

Wade gave in gratefully.

"Here's your bankbook and receipt for expenses," he said to Pencarrow, handing out a packet. "I sold for thirty dollars a head."

"Brandon, it's almost too good to be true."

"Well, it's true—as true as this rustler brand on my head. Pencarrow, the opportunity for you grows. I think I've got an outfit of cowboys. Hogue Kinsey is a wonderful chap. I wonder about that Carter—"

"You must stop talking," interrupted Jacqueline, her cool hand going to Wade's hot face. "Dad—all of you get out of heah."

They left precipitously. She turned the lamp down and shaded the light from Wade's eyes. Then she drew a rocking chair close to the couch.

"You may be Tex Brandon, who has been shot full of holes, and scoffs at them, but all the same you are feverish," she said softly. "You must go to sleep."

"I might sleep, if you left me."

"No. I'll stay heah, and be very quiet."

"Jacqueline, the man does not live who could fall asleep with you sitting beside him."

"Am I so—so disturbing?"

"Disturbing?" laughed Wade, a little wildly. "You are storm, wind, wildfire in prairie grass, chain lightning!"

"Well! A compliment—a doubtful one—from Tex Brandon at last. Try to sleep now. I will go—but how can I if you hold my hand?"

"I'm afraid I don't—want you to—go," returned Wade irrationally, and his eyes fell shut irresistibly. He felt himself drifting. His last sensation was that she ceased to try to withdraw her hand.

When he awoke the room was in deep shadow, the lamp turned very low. He was alone. He roused again at dawn, sensing a presence, but fell asleep again. Next time he opened his eyes the sunlight was streaming through the window. His pain was less acute. The house was astir.

Hal appeared at the living-room door, bright-eyed and handsome.

"Howdy, Tex, old-timer," he said. "Jacque says you slept well. She stayed up all night with you, Tex."

"No!—Hal, where'd she stay?" asked Wade incredulously.

"Right heah in Dad's arm chair. She's gone to bed now to get a little

sleep. Do you know, Tex, I believe Jacque likes you."

"Hand me my boots," said Wade quickly. "I'll rustle for my cabin before the crowd comes in. All right, Hal, if you want to help me over. Carry my coat and gun belt."

Wade made the distance to his cabin easily enough, but he was glad to fall on his bed.

"I've been out to the barn," Hal was saying. "Bilt was up early looking for Kinsey and Kid Marshall. Hicks rode out at daylight, so they said. Jerry troubled, restless—black as a thunder-cloud. Rain Carter gone."

"Gone where?" asked Wade.

"They don't know. And they're plumb curious."

Mid-afternoon came with Wade unable to sleep longer, restless and suffering, worried about the missing cowboys. Jacqueline visited him a little while, to bathe his hot face with cold water, to soothe his pain and strangely ease his unrest. She had little to say and avoided his eyes, and soon left him.

Then Pencarrow and Lightfoot came in.

"Kinsey an' Marshall have been sighted down the range," announced the rancher.

The tall homesteader stood over Wade and gazed down at him with narrowed eyes and grim smile.

"So you been an' gone an' done it," he said.

"Elwood, I didn't expect to be ambushed on our own range in sight of the house," protested Wade.

"Listen. This is Arizona. More desert-bred hombres will shoot you in yore doorway. Anywhere—anytime—except when you meet them face to face!"

"I never will be surprised again," promised Wade quietly.

"Now you're talkin'. Play them at their own game."

"Heah comes the cowboys," interposed Pencarrow from the open door. "Hal is with them. An' the girls runnin' from the house."

Hogue Kinsey entered the cabin, a dusty weary cowboy.

"Howdy, Boss. Them boys told me just now. I never expected to see you alive after that bullet knocked you off the wagon seat. I seen who shot you an' I went after him."

"Reckon I'm just as glad to see you, Hogue."

Jacqueline entered with Jerry.

Kinsey got up to look from Wade to Pencarrow. "I've a tough report. Jerry, suppose you tell your story first."

"Thet I will, an' short an' sweet," replied Jerry with fire in his eye. "Boss, after you rode off on your way to town Carter left us. I didn't see him till sundown. An' then he was shore queer. Next day he rode off alone. I waited, made a circle, took up his trail—an' caught him meetin' some riders in the woods. They had a long confab. I left before they got through. Thet night Carter talked queerer than ever, kind of pumpin' me. Like wantin' me to say I was tired ridin' for you an' lookin' for a bonanza. If he'd had an openin' he'd made me a proposition—I never knew what. Wal, next day he rode off an' didn't come back."

After a pregnant silence, Kinsey spoke out abruptly:

"Boss, it was Carter who shot you. The other man, Neale, one of Harrobin's riders, as we found out, he shot first an' shot at Hal. I seen them just a second before they pulled trigger. You bet they knew who they wanted to shoot at! I spurred after them an' Kid followed me. They had about five

hundred yards' start. They run in on the Pine Mound trail an' stuck to it. Rocks loomed on each side. We began to gain. The timber was open. They began to shoot back at us, usin' their rifles. Kid an' I held our fire."

Kinsey wiped the sweat from his face, coughed, drew a deep breath, and resumed his story.

"We gained, an' their bullets began to spang off the rocks under our horses' hoofs. So I told Kid to open up. He missed half a dozen shots. Then I couldn't stand it any longer. My second shot piled Neale up an' his hoss run off the trail. We kept on. Carter used up all his shells, threw away his rifle, an' pulled his gun. Meanwhile we drew close to Pine Mound. Finally Kid broke a laig of Carter's horse. The fall stunned Carter. We got off, took his gun an' what he had on him before he came to. We mounted an' I told Kid to loose his lasso. I did mine. Carter seen thet, an' yellin' like a madman he plunged for the brush. I roped him—"

Here Kinsey broke off. "Boss, I don't like—to tell the rest—before Miss Jacqueline."

"Go on, Kinsey," spoke up the girl for herself, with spirit. "I want to hear every word. These men tried to kill my brother. They almost killed Brandon."

"I roped him. Rode down the trail. Didn't look back. I came to—that big cottonwood—outside Pine Mound. I jumped off. Kid was right behind. We hanged him—tied the lasso. Carter kicked some-thin' terrible. When he quit—I wrote some words on a piece of paper—an' fastened it to his vest button."

Jacqueline turned away to the window. Pencarrow expelled his breath loudly.

"Wal, I say good!" ejaculated Elwood Lightfoot harshly.

"Hogue, what did you write on that paper?" asked Wade.

"*Warnin' to rustlers. Harrobin an' Drake beware!*" replied the cowboy. "But thet wasn't all Kid an' I did. By thet time we was shore mad. We hid our hosses an' went on in to Pine Mound."

Jerry said, "Don't forget what you found on Carter."

Then Kinsey produced a large roll of dirty greenbacks which he handed to Wade, "Boss, Carter took this to double-cross you."

"Keep that," replied Wade sharply, moving it aside. "Divide it among the boys."

The cowboy let out a nervous laugh. "Boss, we run smack into Harrobin an' Band Drake, with a bunch of men, in front of Bozeman's store. Harrobin spotted us."

"Hullo there, Kinsey," sang out Harrobin, most damn curious an' mean. He would have drawn his gun, but for Drake, who called him an' stepped between. I'd sold Drake cattle, an' I used to take letters to a girl for him. Drake always liked me.

"Let me do the talkin'," he said. "Hogue, what's the idee, bustin' in here, lookin' as if you'd played up the range?"

"Kid an' I been trailin' some cattle," I said, offhand-like. "Lost their tracks out here close. An' we come in for a drink an' some grub. Mr. Drake, did you happen to see thet bunch of steers?"

"You should have heard them haw-haw! All except Harrobin. They was in a good humor. Been tippin' at a bottle. But Harrobin was sore. He had his arm in a sling.

"Cowboy, you get thet drink an' mosey without the grub," said Drake. "Onhealthy for you here."

"All right," I said. "We'll mosey, an' much obliged." Then Harrobin stepped out, black as the ace of spades. "Kinsey, is it true you're ridin' for Pencarrow?" he asked me. I told him yes.

"Thet's all right, if you want to risk it," he went on. "But keep out of Pine Mound. I'll let you off this time to take a message to your boss, Tex Brandon. Tell Brandon thet Blue has throwed in with me an' thet Holbrook Kent has come with him!"

"Blue!" echoed Wade curiously.

"Shore, Blue," interposed Pencarrow. "Drake's real name is Rand Blue. I forgot to tell you. He hails from the Panhandle of Texas. Bad man. Ran a rustler gang in Colorado. Came to Arizona under the name of Drake. Cut quite a swath. Sold me this ranch an' cheated my eyes out—an' at the same time had the gall to try to win Jacqueline."

"Wal, the throwin' together of those two rustler outfits is turrible bad news for this range," put in Elwood Lightfoot.

"Rand Blue!" whispered Wade.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rustlers and Guests

OUT of doors and around next day, Wade still did not feel fit for the saddle. In truth he would have stayed in bed but for the fear—the yearning hunger which was worse than fear—that Jacqueline would come to him, this generous-hearted girl who placed too high a value upon him.

The cowboys had orders to ride out before dawn and return after dark.

Wade climbed the nearest knoll and watched the range with his glass. He could not cover the important flats and swales. He saw no riders and but few cattle. The day dragged. When he could stay out no longer he returned to his cabin to find wild flowers on his table. Jacqueline had been there.

Later Lightfoot called. The homesteader was gloomy. He advised an immediate sale of all Pencarrow's cattle.

"I'm not cattle-wise, Elwood," said Wade, "but I can't see that. If Pencarrow sold out how would that effect this range? It's free, you know."

"It'd be bad. Aulsbrook an' Driscoll would throw their herds up here. An' they'd be hard to dislodge."

"Wouldn't Harrobin and Drake—I mean Blue—wouldn't they clean out other cattlemen the same as Pencarrow?"

"They never have."

"Hell you say! That's strange."

"Shore it is. An' I reckon for Pencarrow to sell out would be equivalent to quittin'."

"A Texan quit! You couldn't make him. And Jacqueline and the twins are as game as he is. That's not the way, Elwood."

"Wal, there *is* only one other way, as I can see. More cattle an' more riders. An' fight these rustlers tooth an' nail!"

"Ah!"

"What's the matter, son? Did you hurt your head, jerkin' up thet way?"

"Yes," lied Wade. The old cattleman had solved the problem of the Pencarrows. More cattle—more riders—and fight! Wade remembered the fortune in tainted money he had hidden under the floor of his cabin. He could buy fifty thousand head of cattle—more if he wanted to—at a price far cheaper than the future would ever offer. He



could quadruple Hogue Kinsey's hard-riding outfit and rid the range of these parasites. He could save the Pencarrows—make their fortune. But at the price of dishonor. He had been a robber. He still held a robber's ill-gotten, blood-stained wealth. Jacqueline would loathe him if she ever found out.

The homesteader left Wade to his strange gloom, no doubt accounting for it by the head wound. Presently it was broken by Jacqueline's quick soft tread on the porch, her pale face in the doorway.

"Brandon! How—are you?" she panted. "Elwood said you looked and talked strange—that your head hurt."

"I reckon I'm—all right," replied Wade, which was a half lie. Then he lay there silent, quivering under her soft cool hands as she bathed his hot face and re-dressed his wound. She left him in the dusk as he feigned sleep.

The cowboys had no report to make, which was favorable. The next morning Wade's fever had left him. After breakfast, which the maid brought, he took his glass and went to a farther and higher knoll, from which he could command a view of half the range.

Wade sighted strange riders that day. He saw dust clouds over the rolling ridge. At night Kinsey sought him with the news that he and Kid Marshall

suspected the rustling of cattle off the far side of the range. Wood and Hicks had been across there, but had not yet ridden in.

"Keep under cover and watch," said Wade. "Shoot if any riders come in range. It's all we can do until I find a better way."

Jerry and Hal, hiding along the cedar belt, had seen no riders. Later Wood and Hicks rode in on lame horses. They had surprised a bunch of rustlers in a brazen raid, driving cattle toward the Holbrook road.

"We emptied three saddles emptyin' our rifles," said Bilt with dark elation. "Then they bore down on us, six or eight of the bunch, an' tried to head us off from the ranch. Shore we had a ride for ten miles."

Wade, fired anew with that report, talked.

"Boys, the odds seem to be a hundred to one against us. Ranchers on this range wouldn't give two-bits for our cattle or our lives. But I can't see it their way—I can't. I tell you, see everything, hear everything, and beat these rustlers to it. Outfigure them! Get the jump on their thoughts! And shoot first, as Wood and Hicks did today. For the rest, practice your draw."

"Practice—practice—practice! Use your rifles. Learn their range and accuracy. Shoot at every jack rabbit, coyote, wolf—every sailing hawk you see. Above all, *never* be surprised. I repeat, always see the other man first. We've got shells enough for an army—we've got the swiftest horses on this range. We'll kill a lot of these rustlers. We'll hang Blue and Harrobin."

"Boss, how about Holbrook Kent?" queried Hogue Kinsey, slowly.

"He will be my job."

"I've seen Kent. Little man, lame from a bullet still in his hip. Not young.

You won't believe it. He's cockeyed! An' supposed to be lightnin'-swift on the draw."

"Boss, Kent is a real hombre," spoke up Kid Marshall. "He'll come out in the open, if he's gonna fight you atall. But as for the rest of them fellers, I say fight them Indian fashion."

"Ahuh. Like Hicks and Wood did today?" rejoined Wade.

"We shore did," spoke up Wood with fire. "Boss, mebbe you didn't know Hicks is part Apache."

"Hicks, are you really part Indian?" queried Wade.

"Half-breed, boss," replied Hicks simply. "Born in Tonto. Crook got me when I was a boy. I ran away from the reservation."

"Well!—Hogue, I'm just getting acquainted with my outfit."

"Boss, we'll shore make this range hum. Cowboys, it's late. Let's turn in."

"Good night. I'll be riding with you in a day or two," returned Wade, and wended a thoughtful way toward his cabin.

After breakfast next morning Wade resumed his seldom neglected practice of the swift drawing of a gun. He was stern at this task when a gasp and a little rich laugh at his back made him whirl. Jacqueline and Rona stood framed in the open doorway.

"Mawnin', Brandon. We saw you just now and wondered if we could slip up on you. Suppose *we* had been rustlers!"

"Good morning, scamps," drawled Wade. "Rustlers wear spurs and boots. They can ride, but not walk—at least not like two slips of girls with pretty little moccasined feet."

"Rona, this man has actually paid me two compliments. Let me hold your gun, Brandon? I saw you move but

couldn't see the gun come out. I heard the click."

Wade handed the heavy Colt to her, butt first.

"Why, the trigger is gone!" she exclaimed.

"Surely. I don't use one."

"But how can you shoot? What makes the hammer fall?"

"I thumb it. Let me show you—See? When I grab the gun my thumb fits over the hammer. The weight of the gun, thrown like this, snaps the hammer from under my thumb. So the gun is really fired as it is thrown."

"I couldn't see. How swift you are! But never mind it again. Sort of chills me. All that magic just to kill some man!"

"Jackie, I think he's won—der—ful," piped in Rona, big-eyed and romantic. "Hal is learning to draw. He showed me. He said Hogue wasn't so awful swift as you but he was shore swift."

"Hogue?" inquired Jacqueline, a little severely.

"Yes, Hogue," retorted Rona, with a flaming blush. "I cain't go around calling all these cowboys 'mister.' Don't I call Mr. Brandon by his first name, Tex?" She ran off.

"Rona is growing up," said Jacqueline thoughtfully. "I'm afraid I cain't manage her any longer."

"She's all right, Jacqueline—a good, lovable, spirited girl."

"Lovable! That's the trouble. Rona is perfectly adorable. I don't mind that. But she's awakening. I've caught her actually making eyes at Hogue Kinsey."

"What could you expect?"

"Oh! Dad would rage. And Mother—she'd have a fit. And I—"

"Jacqueline, they should have left pride of blood back in southern Texas.

These wild cowboys are all right to drive your cattle, risk their lives—and lose them sometimes—fighting rustlers. But they are not fit to make friends of—or sweethearts, or husbands."

"Brandon! How bitter you are!" she exclaimed. "You never spoke that way before."

"Indeed, I forgot myself. But I do think Hogue is a wonderful fellow. His wildness won't make him any less attractive to a young girl like Rona. I advise you to keep her where she can't see him."

"I'll try," she returned, not composedly. "If Rona were my age I—I wouldn't feel such dread. But she's not yet sixteen. To fall in love at that age—with one of these wild-eyed devils—why it'd be terrible. You must help me to prevent it."

"I can discharge Hogue if you say," rejoined Wade coldly.

"Certainly not Brandon, I don't understand you today," she said in perplexity. "But indeed you have been strange and aloof lately. I forget your injury. I'm not reasonable or kind. Let that annoying subject go for the present. What I really ran down here to see you for was to ask you to come to dinner tonight."

"That's—very kind of you," he returned haltingly.

"I baked an apple pie. Do you like apple pie?"

"Do I? My mother used to make it," he replied.

"Then you will come?"

"Thank you. I'm sorry. I must refuse."

"What!" She appeared utterly astonished.

"I can't come. It's kind of you. I'm only one of your cowboys."

"Absurd! That can't be your reason. You won't come?"

"No."

"I shall never ask you again."

"That will be well."

"Oh!—to—to think I—" she cried brokenly, in distress. Then she drew herself up fighting to regain her pride. "Because you did not hound me like Band Drake or those others I wanted you to be my very dear friend—my *only* friend in this dark wild land. I am indebted to you for showing me my mistake."

She turned and with head erect and rapid pace she left Wade standing there, sick in his soul.

Before he had recovered sufficiently he went back to riding with his cowboys, to suffer and reel in his saddle, to pant wet and hot in the shade of cedars, to refuse their entreaties or their assistance. Early they rode out and late they returned. Wade had given Hal the job of scout, watching every day with a field glass from the highest knoll on the range. Before sunrise each morning the riders would leave Hal to climb alone to his post, and after dark they would pick him up.

Wade changed his earlier plan of splitting up his riders into couples. Now they all rode together, no longer drivers of cattle but hunters of men. Day by day, here and there on the range, rustlers made swift raids of a few cattle, always driving into the woods or down into the canyons. Hal reported most of these movements and distinguished one group of rustlers from another by their horses.

Before that month was out Wade and his riders, guided by the half-breed's watchless tracking, surprised one of these outfits in the very act. One of them lived long enough to confess his

gang had no connection with Drake or Harrobin.

Before midsummer was over, Wade's riders had chased other outfits off the open grazing-land. In these instances Wade satisfied himself with seeing a few crippled riders escape, and a riderless horse now and then go galoping off with bridle and mane flying.

But still the herd diminished perceptibly in number.

Late in August the homesteader brought news that made Pencarrow whoop and Wade nod his head as if he had been looking for it. Driscoll had been cleaned out of cattle and Aulsbrook had been reduced to a few thousand head of cows, yearlings and calves.

"I shore knew Rand Blue would rob Aulsbrook some day," roared Pencarrow.

"That was the new combine operatin'," said Lightfoot.

"Where can they sell" queried Wade with exasperation. "Thousands of branded steers"

"Easy as pie," snorted Lightfoot. "Those hombres have more buyers than they need. Like as not they won't ship a hoof."

"Suppose Aulsbrook and Driscoll were to throw their outfits with mine and we'd trail those stolen cattle?"

"Wal, if they would, it'd be damn interestin'. An' it might lead to ranchers who never ask questions an' government beef buyers who don't care where they get cattle so long as the price is low."

"Brandon, we'll need to send to town for winter supplies," said Pencarrow. "We'll not be snowed in till November. But there's no tellin'!"

"Then presently we can count on being shut off from rustlers for a while?" queried Wade.

"Pretty soon now. An' for six months. I reckon Blue an' Harrobin are through right now for this season."

"I can't gamble on that," returned Wade. "Besides there are other outfits of rustlers."

"Have we lost much stock lately?"

"Not that would count, if we had a big herd," said Wade evasively.

"Wal?" rasped the Texan, sitting up to glare at his foreman.

"I've withheld reports because they are insignificant. But—" rejoined Wade, and briefly told facts.

"Whew!" whistled Elwood Lightfoot. "Brandon, you're more than makin' good my brag. That'll spread over the range an' through Arizona."

"Pencarrow, we can take care of a big herd as easily as a little one," said Wade, spreading his hands. "I've a bunch of Indians in these cowboys."

"We'll buy in the spring. To hell with Blue and Harrobin!"

"They'll lay off Cedar Range till you do get that big herd," said Lightfoot, warningly.

"If they raid us clean they'll have to travel slow. Through miles of timber in any direction! We'll trail them, hang at their heels, pick them out of their saddles, shoot them in their sleep. If they turn on us we can outrun them. Thanks to your thoroughbreds, Pencarrow."

"For heaven's sake don't tell the girls you're ridin' their hosses."

"Brandon, it's new tactics in these parts," said Lightfoot. "If you can dodge a pitched battle where you're greatly outnumbered you'll go a long way."

September passed. Indian summer hovered in the air.

One Sunday the cowboys took one

of their few days off. That morning Hogue Kinsey visited Wade early, stamping into the cabin while Wade was shaving.

"Boss, have you seen who'n the hell is here?" he demanded.

"No, Hogue. Who is here?"

"Visitors from Holbrook. Two spruced-up dandies come sparkin' Rona an' Jacqueline."

Wade cut himself with the razor.

"Who are they?"

"John McComb an' a cocky youngster, son of the banker at Holbrook. Hal didn't remember his name."

"Well, what of it, Hogue?" asked Wade slowly. "It's none of your business—or mine."

"Boss, I told you. I begged you to let me go."

"I remember, Hogue. But I couldn't do without you."

"Aw, I know. But I gotta tell you—get this off my chest or bust."

"Hogue, I'm your pard. Go ahead. Spill it."

"Tex, I've made a turrible fool of myself. But I couldn't help it. That day Rona looked at me—you remember—an' told her Dad I was won—derful—Wal, I fell awful in love with her an' it's grown wuss ever since."

"Is that all, Hogue?"

"All! It was bad enough, but it'll kill me now. I seen Rona with him. She was laughin' an' cuttin' up—the little flirt!"

"Hogue, she's an innocent kid. It'll do her good. Poor lonely child! You ought to be glad."

"Tex, you don't know what love is," complained Hogue in a passion of misery. "I oughtn't hold that against you. But I do—somehow. An' I oughtn't talk to you this way. But I can't help it. You're a gunman. But for you to expect me to be glad—glad some cocky rich

youngster has come to make up to Rona—why Boss, you ain't human!"

"Hogue, can I trust you?" asked Wade.

"Trust me! Why, shore you can," replied Hogue, warped out of his despair to gaze wonderingly at Wade.

"You've got me wrong, when you say I'm not human—that I don't know what love is," returned Wade in a low voice. "I'm in love with Jacqueline. Terribly, hopelessly. I never dreamed of her as attainable. Not for me! But I've been a sick, desperate wretch ever since. Just now when you told me McComb had come to spark Jacqueline I nearly cut my throat. I wish I had. But I'll go on, Hogue, just the same—with never a hope to have Jacqueline, though I'd sell my soul to do it—and I'll die trying to save her father, and therefore her."

Kinsey sprang up. "My Gawd! Tex, forgive me," he cried, hoarsely, and stalked out of the cabin.

Wherever Wade went that Sunday, and Pencarrow called him to the house, walked with him here and there, he had the misfortune to encounter Jacqueline with her admirer. She wore a becoming gown and she was radiant. He might have been a servant for the little notice she took of him.

Returning from the corrals, Wade encountered all the Pencarrows and their guests, who were evidently about to make an early start on the long drive to town.

Hogue Kinsey stood holding the team, a job that he cordially detested, judging from his cold set face and flashing eyes. He shot Wade a warning glance.

Jacqueline accosted Wade peremptorily: "Brandon, do you instruct your cowboys to keep their mouths shut when questioned?"

"That depends upon who questions them," replied Wade curtly.

"Somebody has been riding my horses. They are thin, scratched and ragged. Pen has a cut on his shoulder and he's lame."

The girl was undoubtedly angry and grieved. Wade knew her love for her thoroughbreds and he would not have minded but for her interested and curious admirer.

"Kinsey heah is evidently deaf and dumb," she went on. "Will you oblige me by telling me who rode Pen?"

"I did."

"With whose permission?"

"No one's. I just took him."

"How dare you? I don't allow anyone to ride my hawsses, especially Pen."

"I'm sorry, Miss Pencarrow," returned Wade coldly. "I really did not think to ask you. We had ridden out all the other fast horses. They needed a rest. And your fat bunch needed work. They certainly got it. Pen is not lame. He picked up a stone and limps a little."

"Dad, I'm perfectly furious," cried Jacqueline. "If I were boss heah I'd—I'd—"

"Wal, I'm glad you're not boss," interrupted Pencarrow bluntly. "But since you tax Brandon so unkindly, to say the least, why not heah just how Pen came to be lame."

"There is no occasion to tell her," said Wade hastily. "It was only an incident of every day for us riders."

"Tell her, Hal," cried Rona resentfully.

"Bet your life I'll tell her," retorted Hal. "I'd told her long ago but for Dad."

"What are you keeping from me?" queried Jacqueline.

"Hal, are you breaking my rule?" interposed Wade.

"Boss, I am, this once. I don't care a damn. Jacque had one of her queer spells today. But she shan't take it out on you."

"Never mind my spell," returned the girl stiffly. "Tell me what's happened!"

"Nothin' much to us riders, Jacque," answered the lad, nonchalantly. "If we hadn't ridden your horses lately we'd been worse off. You know my job is scoutin' with a glass from the high knoll. Well, I was watchin' for the boys to show along the edge of the cedars. Sunset right in my eyes the other way. That's how it came I got held up by two geezers. They sneaked up an' got the drop on me. One of them wanted to bust my head open right there. But the other thought they could get money from Dad by kidnagin' me. So they tied my hands, made me get on my horse. We went down the hill. I seen the cow-boys off in the cedars an' I yelled bloody murder."

"My kidnapers wheeled for the open range keepin' hold of my bridle an' did they ride! At first we were too far apart for shootin'. But Hogue an' the bunch burned a lot of powder anyway. Brandon was up on Pen. Pen got out ahead an' the others fell back. He began to catch up with us. Then those two geezers began to shoot back at Brandon. They shot all their ammunition away. But he kept comin' an' gainin'. I heard Brandon shoot an' I heard his bullet hit the man who had my bridle square in the back. He yelled somethin' awful, let go my bridle an' his own."

"The other fellow grabbed him an' kept him from fallin' off. I got my bridle up an' pulled my horse. Brandon went by like the wind, workin' that Winchester. They went out of sight. I heard more shots. Then Brandon

came trotting over the ridge. We rode back to meet the outfit. I guess that's about all."

"Hal!" Jacqueline whispered, and reached blindly for her brother, who was quick to take her hand.

She raised her head to look at Wade, and it was certain she saw him alone.

"I didn't know. I despise myself—for insulting you. I was terribly wrong."

"It's all right, Miss Pencarrow," rejoined Wade hurriedly. "Naturally you were upset. You love Pen. He's a grand horse. But neither I or any of us shall ride him again."

"If Pen is that grand he might save Dad or Rona—or you, Brandon," she said. "You shall ride him!"

"I'd rather—not," replied Wade hesitatingly.

"But Pen is yours, I give him to you," she replied with finality. "Gentlemen," she said to her guests, "it is too bad you did not get away before I fell into one of my tantrums—to insult Mr. Brandon, who has been our friend and saviour. I am sorry. It was kind of you to visit us. Good-by."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Winter of Doubt

HAL'S story of his abduction almost split the Pencarrow family. The mother went into hysterics and demanded that her son should no longer be permitted to ride with these wild cowboys. Pencarrow sustained a shock, but he realized that Hal was no longer a child, and he stoutly upheld the lad in his determination to stand by Brandon and do his share.

Jacqueline ended the argument by appealing to Brandon: "I think Hal should ride with you. But if possible, give the boy your care and protection while he is learning."

Next day Wade kept Kinsey and Hicks with him while he sent Hal and the other cowboys, and also Lightfoot, to Holbrook for two wagonloads of supplies. Wade took the post of scout on the high knoll. Kinsey and Hicks, with light packs, rode away on the west side of the range, where they were to hide in the timber and watch the open. In case of a raid they were to take the trail of the rustlers, creep up on them in camp, shoot and slip away under cover of the night.

Wade sat in the shade of a pine and watched every moving object within range of the powerful field glass. In the dusk he rode down to the cedars and back to the ranch and a late supper in the kitchen. Pencarrow came in to talk, and Jacqueline followed to ask questions he could not answer. The one she came solely to satisfy herself upon was the one she did not ask—and it concerned his return, his safety.

He sat on his porch in the cool starlight, and he saw Jacqueline's dim face at her open window. She watched him and he knew it, and that gave rise to vaster trouble than his longing to watch her. When he could bear it no longer he went inside, almost at once to peep from his dark window, to see that she at once closed hers and lighted her lamp.

Before dawn he rode off on his lonely vigil, keeping to the open range, and watching with eyes that pierced the gray gloom.

That day was like its predecessor. In the succeeding seven days the first dust clouds he sighted came from the

wagons and horses of the returning cowboys. Wade rode in before sunset. Jerry reported so uneventful a round trip to Holbrook that its very quietness seemed ominous.

Lightfoot kept silence until the girls had taken Hal and his numerous packages away to the sitting-room, and the cowboys had left him with Wade and Pencarrow.

"Wal, Brandon, the seed we sowed has growed powerful rank an' strong," he said. "You're supposed to have an outfit of wild-ridin' half-breeds an' cowboys. The hangin' of thet rustler at Pine Mound threw the light upon Blue an' Harrobin. I'd almost go so far as to say it made them outlaws. Every cowboy you meet will tell you that before long the big bones will be decoratin' a cottonwood. That's a juicy quid for cowboys. Some gambler blew in from Tombstone to taunt Holbrook Kent's backers with Tex Brandon's record in Tombstone, Douglas, Yuma. Kent is a marked man. If he was a four-flusher, which no one could call him, he'd be forced to meet you. An' to sum up, thet'll be hot-stove an' fireplace gossip all winter. Next summer an' fall will tell the tale."

"It'll be told before summer if I can write my page," said Wade.

"Shore. Hit at them first. They won't be expectin' thet," replied Lightfoot.

"Will they raid me again before winter?" asked Pencarrow.

"I've been expecting a raid every day. But nothing has happened. Kinsey and Hicks are out. I gave them a week. If they're not back by tomorrow we'll hunt them up."

"If I had money, I'd buy cattle," rejoined Pencarrow decisively.

"I banked nine thousand dollars for you after I sold the herd we got back,"

said Wade. "Why not save a thousand out of that and buy with the rest."

"I owe you nearly seven thousand."

"What if you do? Let that ride."

"Could I mortgage the ranch?"

"Shore. With all this stir, you could borrow big on it."

"No mortgages," cut in Wade, shaking his head. "That's bad. Keep the land and property free."

"I can sell out to Aulsbrook for ten thousand," interfered Lightfoot. "He shore wants that water right of mine."

"If you sell to anyone it'll be Pencarrow," replied Wade. "If next spring is absolutely the right time to buy then we must raise money some other way."

"Heah we air talkin' big," interrupted Pencarrow impatiently. "An' it's money thet talks. I'll buy another thousand haid an' then be satisfied to build up slow. Thet was our original idea."

"Yes. But what a pity!" ejaculated Wade, regretfully.

"Beggars cain't be choosers, Brandon. I tell you I'm happy now," retorted the rancher emphatically.

"But this chance will never come again," protested Wade.

"What chance?"

"To make a fortune."

"No, I reckon not. I shore hope not. At least not owin' to a cattle war on one side an' rustler bands on the other."

"Perhaps I should have said to retrieve the fortune you lost," ventured Wade, significantly.

"Wal, thet hurts, an' if anythin' could upset my equilibrium, thet would. But I was practically ruined. An' I refuse to let dreams of a shore chance to make a fortune cheat me of contentment now."

That ended the discussion.

Kinsey and the half-breed did not

return the following day or the next. On the third, Wade made a very early start for the place where the two cowboys had planned to camp, and found that they had not been there for a week. Trailing them was too slow a job. Wade with his cowboys circled the west end of the range and soon ran across recent tracks of a small bunch of cattle traveling in a straight line westward. No doubt Kinsey and Hicks had followed. Before the day was out Wade came upon signs of the first camp of the rustlers, which at once took on deeper significance because of two hastily dug and covered graves.

"Doggone!" drawled Jerry, as he rolled a cigarette. "Hogue an' Hicks paid their respects to this outfit, huh?"

They turned back, arriving at the ranch late in the night. Kinsey and Hicks lay in their bunks so dead asleep that they did not awaken. On the following morning Wade let all the cowboys have a much-needed rest, while he went down to see Elwood Lightfoot. The homesteader listened and pondered for a while.

"Lull before the storm, mebbe," he said. "I look to see Pencarrow cleaned out this fall. It'll cost you ten thousand head of steer to bust up this new rustler combine."

"That'd be cheap."

"Make Pencarrow buy more cattle pronto. Blue an' Harrobin will concentrate on the Cedar Range next spring. I've an idee all these ranchers would contribute a lot of cattle to the good cause of egg'in' on the rustlers to this range. They'd lose the cattle anyhow."

"What do you mean? Have Aulsbrook, Driscoll, Mason, and even little cattlemen like Drill drive some stock over here to be stolen?"

"Ahuh. Brandon, I reckon all the

cattlemen between the desert an' the White Mountains would be a heap interested in thet idee, provided you can convince the cattlemen you'll clean out the rustlers. Aulsbrook, Driscoll—they know damn wal they stand to lose *all* their cattle. Blue has been around this range for near five years. Harrobin less. It's about time for them to make some top raids, then move on to their next stampin' ground. Say, what ails you?"

Wade had violently responded to an illuminating thought.

"You've given me a hunch!" After that ejaculation Wade abruptly left.

Hogue Kinsey was awake and gave his report.

"We tracked nine rustlers drivin' a small herd hell-bent for the brakes. Sneaked up on their first camp just about dark. They were eatin' round the fire. We each got in a shot an' then run for our horses. Tracked them next day. Found their camp. There was seven of them, an' all damn suspicious an' watchful. The instant we opened up they was bouncin' lead off the rocks an' trees. We'd planned to sling some lead ourselves an' vamoose before the rest waked up. We slung it an' vamoosed, but the goin' was hot. Next mornin' we found they'd broke camp in the night, leavin' some seventy-odd steers in the woods—an' a couple of their outfit layin' with guns an' spurs gone, an' pockets inside out. Then we left an' headed back for home."



The snows did not come in time to save most of Pencarrow's cattle from the raiders. He had bought 1,500 head from Drill, and these five, two, and three year old steers went with the rest. While Wade and his cowboys trailed and fought one outfit of rustlers, two or three larger ones made successive raids, leaving only a few hundred cows and calves on the range.

When the winter finally did send the rustlers to their burrows in the brakes, Pencarrow was again on the verge of ruin.

A thin skim of snow lay on the range except on south exposures where the sun struck warm. The few cows and calves, melancholy reminders of Pencarrow's once big herd, concentrated on those grassy spots. And the November days came, dark with leaden skies and dreary with the moan in the pine trees.

But the big bunkhouse presented a cheerful sight with its blazing cedar fagots in the open fireplace, and the colorful trappings of the cowboys strewe around.

Pencarrow, accompanied by Jacqueline and the twins, had just addressed the outfit, including Elwood Lightfoot, thanking them in a husky voice for their efforts to save him and his family, and advising them to leave Cedar Ranch to be employed by better ranchers who could pay for their wonderful services.

A silence ensued.

"Brandon, will you leave?" asked Pencarrow.

"If you need to ask—no!" replied Wade, without glancing up.

The rancher turned from Wade to Kinsey, and repeated the query.

"Mr. Pencarrow, I'll stick," replied the cowboy quietly.

"Me too," said Jerry.

"Shucks, we ain't begun to fight," added Bilt Wood.

The half-breed was slower to reply, his black eyes glittering: "Boss, I'm half Indian an' never quit a trail."

That left Kid Marshall, the bowlegged little desperado of the group, always dry, cool, humorous, long-winded.

"You couldn't drive me away, Mr. Pencarrow," he said. "Somehow we jest fit here. An' it ain't all Tex, either. I never seen any folks I liked to work for so much. We admire you for standin' pat when most any rancher would quit. We think powerful much of Hal an' the girls for their nerve an' loyalty to you. An' short and sweet, Mr. Pencarrow, we boys have joined hands with Tex an' we know, if you an' everybody else don't, that we're gonna kill Blue an' Harrobin."

Pencarrow, red and flustered, spread his hands to Brandon. "So we're goin' on cattle raisin'?" he asked gruffly.

"We are. All this loss and labor and trouble has just been practice. We won't make the same mistakes twice. These rustlers will make the same mistake too many times."

"Wal, I don't know what to say," rejoined Pencarrow, helplessly.

"Dad, there's nothing to say, except that we understand," said Jacqueline, her dark eyes eloquent upon Wade. The girls went out with their father. Then Wade followed to close the door of the bunkhouse.

"Pencarrow, it'd have been a pity to break up that outfit," he said, feelingly.

"I'm beat, Brandon. But to be honest I'm shore happy you're all stayin' on. I'll get up an' fight again."

Wade turned off on the trail through the snow toward his cabin.

"I'll walk over with you," said

Jacqueline, as casually as if she had been doing that regularly. She slipped her gloved hand inside his arm. There was no help for it. She meant to make him her friend. He could not insult her again. She walked in silence, her heavy buckskins crunching the half frozen snow.

She said presently, "Did you see Hogue's eyes on Rona?"

"Yes."

"And did you catch her looking at him?"

"That would have been hard to miss."

"I could almost love that handsome devil myself."

Wade laughed, and it seemed to ease the viselike pressure in his breast.

She was silent again for quite a time, then she queried simply, "Will you come to supper tonight?"

"No—thank you," he replied, surprised into confusion.

"Won't you ever come—Tex?"

"I—I think not."

"We are facing a long, cold, hard winter. I'll be lonely."

"You will indeed. It's a pity town is shut off. You and Rona need friends—some fun—excitement. It'll be a long time before you'll have neighbors on this range."

"I'll be a little old lady with a lace cap and a querulous voice. But I shall not miss town acquaintances."

They reached his porch, and as Wade stepped up Jacqueline's hand slipped from his arm. She remained standing below, looking up.

"If I were frozen—would you ask me in?" she inquired calmly.

"What a question! Certainly I would."

"Well, I *am* frozen."

"You! With that fleece-lined leather coat—your woolen dress—and heavy

boots?" he ejaculated, feeling as silly and inadequate as his words.

"I did not mean frozen by the snow and wind."

Wade felt helplessly unable to reply to this.

"Brandon, I was hateful to you for a long time."

"Perhaps that was right—and best."

"I'm sorry. I'm particularly sorry I stooped so low as to flirt with John McComb. It failed of its purpose."

Wade looked the intense surprise and curiosity that he refused to voice.

"I wanted to make you jealous."

"Well!" he burst out, and halted, as if strangled.

"You're the only man of all that have come here—who—who never *saw* me," she confessed frankly. "I liked it at first. Now I don't like it so much. It has been good for my vanity. I shall continue to ask you to come to dinner—and to talk to me a little afterward. Won't you? It'd be a kindness if no more."

"I told you—no," he answered sadly.

"But don't you like me at all?" she flashed.

"Yes. I—I like you, admire you, respect you more than words can tell."

"You do not!" she exclaimed petulantly.

She was irresistible. Wade divined the imperative need of cutting short this colloquy.

"I must—since I'm going to die in your service presently," he said brutally.

"Oh!" she cried, as if torn.

He went on. "It's a hundred to one that I'll be shot before I clean out these rustlers' nests. Think! Suppose I *more* than liked you—or infinitely more, suppose you *more* than like me, which is ridiculous. It would soften me, shake

my nerve—and I'd be easy game for Kent or some other gunman before I could save your father. Try to see it that way. Good night."

When the hunting was over, Wade's cowboys had little work outside of mending saddles, bridles, harness, and chopping wood, on which last they gambled as they did on everything.

For Wade to be with them was to stay young. But he had a grave problem which gripped him as soon as he faced it, and which left little time for the cowboys.

That problem was whether or not to spend the hidden fortune on cattle to throw upon Cedar Ranch Range.

There had been a time when he repudiated the idea, scorned it, drove it from his consciousness. But some perverse devil argued with him, nagged him relentlessly, told him that it did not matter how he saved Pencarrow so long as he saved him. If it were dishonorable to use this ill-gotten wealth to save the rancher, and indirectly his gallant boy and lovely daughters, such dishonor could fall only upon him, should he ever be found out. Since he asked nothing for himself, how could his act be selfish or base?

Christmas Eve brought a surprise in shape of a dinner to the cowboys, kept secret until the very day. The boys whooped with joy, then lapsed into awe. Wade felt both wretched and happy because he could not evade this invitation.

So he went, forgetting himself, glad for the pleasure of these hard homeless cowboys, to whom Christmas usually meant nothing but a debauch. The Pencarrows made it merry for their guests. There was a heap of gifts under the Christmas tree. The dinner was such as

to make the cowboys eat as if it were to be the last time in their lives. Rona in a long white gown, new to the cowboys, appeared to have been transformed into a lovely radiant young woman. As for Jacqueline, who also wore white—a gown cut low and without sleeves—she seemed to Wade to move and speak from a glamorous haze. She had smiled at him, had given her hand, had called him Tex; and seemed to mean that she had dressed thus for him alone.

After the dinner Kid Marshall was the only cowboy who could respond to Jacqueline's merry call for a speech.

"Our lovely hostesses, an' our good boss," he said, "we shore thank you for this grand feast, an' more for the kindness of your hearts. It will never be forgotten by one of us. It has fetched into our lives somethin' different. We will be the better for this gatherin' at your table, for the human thought of us. Shore, when another Christmas rolls around some of us will be missin'. But to have been present here, to be made to feel worth kindness, to have the privilege of fightin' for this family, will change our very lives. It will make us forget that we have been drifters of the range, outcasts who had no hope of good, an' we will be happy to die for you if thet must be."

Marshall's pathos added the only sad touch to that merry evening—a reminder of the stern menace that hung over Brandon and his riders.

At parting Jacqueline pressed Wade's hand, and with a dancing devil in her dark eyes she said, "After all, I succeeded in getting you to come to dinner, didn't I?"

"Indeed you did. Yet I—must thank you for something I feel and cannot speak."

The days passed, grew longer, and the sun warmer. All the south slopes were bare. March found the range showing a touch of green. Down on Lightfoot's protected farm the mockingbirds had come back to sing.

Wade welcomed the end of the long winter. The last few weeks he had been almost a recluse. He awaited the wearing out of his will or an illumination of mind.

While practicing with his gun one day—a habit that had become almost mechanical—a thought, a query, coming from no source he divined, halted him. If he were killed presently in the meeting with Kent, what would become of all that money he had hidden?

"It should be put to good use before I meet Kent," he soliloquized. And he became lost in profound thought. The bell that called the cowboys to supper did not stir Wade. He sat in the dusk before the red embers of his neglected fire. And all at once he had a slight strange tremor. He would restore Pen-carrow's lost property, and therewith the happiness of his family.

It was over—the long ordeal. He stood up and shook himself as if to rid himself of a shell.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Revelations

IT was a lovely May morning, when, after watching eighteen thousand head of dusty and tired cattle stream by down into the range, Wade rode on slowly toward the ranch-house porch.

They were all there, almost strange to him after his absence for so many

full weeks of hard action, and their dearness to him flooded over him like a tide. Jacqueline stood behind the rest in the doorway, her face white, her dark eyes dilated and intent. She vanished as Hal and Rona rushed out to meet Wade.

Hogue Kinsey, whom Wade had left behind on this trip, leaned against a post, with his slight smile and the clear brilliance of his eyes.

"Howdy, Tex," he drawled. "I shore am glad to see you-all."

Pencarrow stood on the porch, his leonine head erect, his gray hair ruffled, as if he had been running a nervous hand through it.

"Wal, heah you air," he said huskily.

"Howdy, Pencarrow," replied Wade with a happy ring in his cool voice, as he reached for the outstretched hand. "Have you seen our new herd?"

"We been watchin' them come all mawnin', an' reckoned you'd never come. Jackie saw you first, way down the road."

Rona evidently saw Jacqueline inside the dark doorway, for she beckoned eloquently while still clinging to Wade's arm. "Tex," she said, looking up at him, "Jacque kept us up all this long while. Now she's cracked, as Hogue would say. And Ma ran off crying."

"Aw, I'm doin' thet myself," interposed Hal. "My Gawd, Tex, but we're glad to see you."

Wade needed all his nerve to hide his feeling. "Eighteen thousand odd—the finest I ever saw," he said. "None under two years, except the calves born on the way up. Steers and bulls galore, and about fifteen thousand cows. We'll double in a year."

"But—but—" stuttered the rancher, his face purple.

"All paid for—and cheap as dirt. Talk about luck."

"Paid for?" echoed Pencarrow.

"Sure. I had some money, you know. And my hunch was to buy this spring when all the cattlemen south of Cedar Range were broke and scared weak by the fear of a great rustler season."

"Brandon, you *paid* for thet herd?"

"I have the receipts. And I'm your new partner."

"Wal! So thet was what you had up your sleeve? Jackie, come out heah. Somebody's got to thank my new partner."

But Jacqueline did not come.

"Dad, I'll thank him," exclaimed Rona, her laugh rich and sweet. She reached up to whisper in Wade's ear. "You're a darling! Don't mind about Jacque. She's crazy to see you. Oh, I found out. Give her a little time. She feels things, you know."

"Brandon, come out with it!" thundered the rancher. "How'd you ever do it? Who're all those riders?"

"Perhaps I'd better tell you in private," said Wade seriously.

"Private, hell! I have no secrets from my family. Jackie, come out heah."

"I'm—not presentable," she said, almost inaudibly. "Send Brandon in."

"We'll all go in," boomed the rancher and led the way.

Wade saw Jacqueline far back in the room, advancing with hesitation, evidently having controlled extreme agitation.

"Howdy, Jacqueline," he said, taking her hands. "We're all back, safe and sound, with more riders and a lot of cattle; I've gone in partnership with your father. And you'll have two bosses now."

"Oh, what have you done?" she cried.

"Strikes me you've asked me that

question before," replied Wade with a laugh, and he squeezed her hands. "Well, I hardly know what I *have* done. Played the game, I guess, Jacqueline, with the cards dealt me. Nothing for you or Pencarrow—for any of you to feel badly about."

Jacqueline drew away from Wade with some return of dignity. "I'm not quite myself lately. I've had my troubles with this family. Then, you come roaring back with a million cattle and horses! It was a little too much—Now what *have* you done?"

"I've gone into partnership with your dad."

"So you said. I don't see the fairness of such a connection for you. But I'm happy about it."

Wade sat down. "Wal, folks, I was just smothered with luck," he began easily, as he turned his sombrero round and round, and tried to remember the narrative he had constructed.

"You know we rode off intendin' to buy a few thousand head of cattle. Rode to Aulsbrook's ranch first day. The man was beside himself with rage and grief. Only the day before, rustlers had run off his herd, leaving only scattered bunches and strays. I had an inspiration. I said: 'Aulsbrook, what'll you sell for—ranch, horses, including the cattle just raided?'"

"He took me up like a flash. 'Give me ten thousand dollars, and I'll shake this range pronto!' And he began to curse Harrobin and Blue. I said, 'Take you up. Come in and sign a bill of sale on the deal.'"

"I paid him and took on his riders, except a couple, and his foreman. That hombre, I'll bet, could tell something about the raid. We trailed that herd for two days before we caught up. Found them in a canyon valley, a wild beautiful

place that Hicks called Red Gulch. It's about a hundred miles from here. We hid our horses and scouted. There were a good many more cattle penned up than Aulsbrook had lost. Around eight thousand, we reckoned. We found where the raiders had camped. They were gone.

"Hicks knew the lay of the land and the few trails. He led us across country to head them off. We surprised that outfit. Ha, we sure did! Surprised me to see they had no idea of pursuit. Instead of standing their ground to fight they broke and ran—those that could run—at our first fire. We captured a couple of cripples. Harrobin's outfit. They confessed and swore they'd leave the country. Harrobin was at Quirts, a little town farther south, a rendezvous for these gangs, same as Pine Mound. They told us who the buyer was. You'll throw a fit when I tell you."

"All right. Let me throw it right heal!"

"Mason."

"Mason? Not Lem Mason of Mariposa?"

"Yes, Lem Mason, big cattle dealer and merchant. He ran the M Bar ranch below Quirts as a blind. He sold his own brand at Mariposa and drove stolen brands into New Mexico."

"Wal, for God's sake, who *is* honest on this range? Tex, am I a rustler, or air you?"

"Looks like I was! Well, we left the herd right in Red Gulch and rode down to Quirts. I rounded up Harrobin and Mason in a saloon, drinking to each other's health and long life, I reckon. Well, to be short and sweet about that meeting—I got the money from Harrobin—money just paid over by Mason."

"We camped, and next day rode south again. By this time we knew where

to go. Briefly, I bought ten thousand head from four ranchers, most of these from a cattleman named Drone. We drove back. I forgot to say I added five more riders to my sixteen. That was a drive. Two weeks or more back to Red Gulch! All the rest of the time—a month, I reckon, we've been driving our eighteen thousand head home."

"Home?" flashed Jacqueline with a smile.

"Yes, home! And that reminds me, I want a tub of hot water."

"Tex, I'll send some over," drawled Hal.

"We'll have lunch in about an hour," said Jacqueline. "And if you're not heah by then I'll come after you."

"In that case you can expect me," returned Wade weakly, and left. Pencarrow and Kinsey followed him, caught up, and strode one on each side.

"I seem to be kinda popular," complained Wade.

"Out with it!" rang Pencarrow.

"Come clean, Tex, you can't fool us with your stories," added Hogue.

"Will you keep it secret from Hal and the girls?"

"I won't make no promises," declared the rancher.

"Well, do your best. Just so Jacqueline doesn't hear," replied Wade resignedly. "Listen, you curious bloodthirsty cusses! We cleaned out Harrobin's gang. Killed most—crippled the rest."

"Ahuh! How about Harrobin?"

Wade was silent until they reached the cabin.

"Boss, get it off your chest," advised the cowboy.

"Mason bawled like one of his bulls," resumed Wade. "The barefaced front he made! But it was no good. Harrobin calmly betrayed him."

"Mason bawled, huh? He shore was a loudmouthed man," replied Pencarrow. "What else did he do?"

Wade bent over to remove his wet and blackened socks. "He—drew on me."

"Aw now—he did?" ejaculated Kinsey, his breath whistling.

"Mason drew on you?—Haw! Haw!" returned the Texan harshly. "Wal, then, how about Harrobin?"

"Pencarrow, we hanged that hombre!"

Wade did not analyze what possessed him when for the first time in years he shaved off his beard. He scarcely recognized the pale lean face. Then he hurriedly dressed in new garments, and masking himself with a handkerchief, he presented himself at the living-room door. Rona, who saw him first, was startled. Then Hal and Jacqueline, coming in with steaming dishes, stopped in their tracks.

"Hands up, Pencarrow," he ordered.

Rona gave a squeal of delight and snatched off his mask.

"I knew you. And all the time you've pretended to be an old geezer! Look at him, Jacque. Isn't he just the darlinest cowboy?"

Jacqueline regarded him gravely. "I don't think I'd call him that, Rona, in the wildest flight of my imagination."

Pencarrow, who had almost failed to recognize his partner, growled his amazement. "Brandon, you're shore the damndest fellow I ever met!"

They had lunch, which seemed a kind of dream to Wade. Often he felt Jacqueline's dark eyes on him, in puzzled wonder.

After lunch Pencarrow took him off to a point where they could view the range, and the afternoon passed in discussion and planning for the future.

He had supper with the cowboys. Kinsey had filled the chuck wagon with supplies to use on a very necessary trip to Holbrook. There were twenty-two cowboys, counting Hal.

Their camp was at the edge of the nearest group of pines, on the brook that ran down from the range. Several canvas tents shone in the light of the campfires.

Pencarrow brought his daughters down. The ejaculations of admiration were loud and profound.

"Jerry, you run this outfit in my absence," Wade was saying. "All you got to do is ride out in bunches of five, day and night, and circle that herd. If you run into any riders shoot first and ask questions afterward. Let's see. I'll take the three wagons, leaving the chuck wagon here. And I'll want Kid Marshall, Bilt Wood, Hal, and Hogue to go with me."

Hogue Kinsey drew Wade aside. "Boss, let me off on that trip to town," he begged. "I'm not at all well an' you know I can't drive a team—an' I don't want to go nohow."

"Hogue! What the hell's wrong with you?" demanded Wade.

"Honest to Gawd, Boss, I ain't myself at all," protested Hogue.

"I should smile you're not," snapped Wade. "Like as not I'll run into Blue's outfit. Some rider dropped in on us last camp. He'd come from Winslow. Said Blue and Kent had been there. Do you want to stay here when that chance faces me?"

"Hell no!" exclaimed Kinsey, as if wrenched. "I was lyin'—shore, but don't ask me why."

"Well!" ejaculated Wade, as Hogue stalked off in the gloom. Then Wade lounged along the brook, pondering

Kinsey's queer statement. Ahead of him a little tent, the kind sheepherders used, gleamed pale in the light of a campfire some rods off. Rounding the tent toward the light, he almost ran into Jacqueline. Behind her came her father with some cowboys.

"Oh!" cried Jacqueline breathlessly, her hands going up.

"Sorry to startle you. I didn't see you coming."

Then, as she stood like a statue, he became acutely aware of her intensity.

"You remind—me—" whispered the girl, breaking off with a hand clapped to tremulous telltale lips.

Wade's panic sent a shudder over him. "No wonder," he laughed. "With my clean face and all these beardless cowboys about!" He passed on, trying not to hurry, pretending some business with his riders.

But she called, "Brandon, don't go! I was hunting for you."

He turned back and she approached swiftly and eagerly. "Miss Jacqueline! What is it?" he rejoined as she halted with a hand half outstretched.

"I'm so worried," she whispered, and taking his arm with both hands she led him away from the camp.

Jacqueline looked back at the camp as they crossed the little bridge. She appeared bent on getting somewhere in a hurry and without being seen.

"What's the rush, Jacqueline?" asked Wade, at length.

"We must—get there—first," panted the girl.

She led him in a wide detour around the ranch house to the north end where the pines grew thickest on the slope of the knoll, and in among the pines to a secluded nook, which Wade remembered the sisters had frequented on hot days the preceding summer. A

hammock and a bench showed dimly in the moonlight. Jacqueline led Wade in behind these where they could see the little moonlit glade without being visible themselves.

"Brandon—they meet—here," she whispered.

"Who meet?" asked Wade, though he had guessed well enough.

"Rona and Hogue. Many nights—since you've—been gone. I discovered by accident. I was—sitting at my window—looking out—wondering how you—And suddenly I saw someone in white—gliding along there—and here. Rona! Then Hogue came—the brazen cowboy!"

"Well!" ejaculated Wade soberly. "Damn that cowboy!"

"I don't believe that we can blame Hogue so much," went on Jacqueline. "When Rona wants anything—she always gets it. . . . I didn't tell her what I'd seen. But I asked her—about Hogue—if he had made love to her—and she lied. Rona lied!—And she's just passed sixteen!"

"Sixteen is old enough for a girl to fall in love—to lie—to do anything," replied Wade thoughtfully. "But surely this is only a case of boy-and-girl love? You know."

"Oh, I don't know," wailed Jacqueline. "And I'm terribly afraid."

"Of what?"

"That they've gone so—so far we can't—"

"Jacqueline, Hogue wouldn't take advantage of that child."

"Oh, you think so," she exclaimed, grasping at hope. "But how could he help it—if she—if she—Rona has burst out like a full-bloom rose. It wouldn't be natural or human to resist her."

"All true," agreed Wade. "They must be in love—to dare this. I can't see any

shame in it. I know Hogue. He wouldn't lay a hand on her."

"No he wouldn't!—Just you wait," returned Jacqueline passionately. "I couldn't believe my eyes. But I saw."

"What did you see?" demanded Wade.

"I saw Rona run—*run* into his arms. They stood back up there—right in the open. They stood clasped together. A long time! Then Hogue picked Rona up and packed her down here."

"My God! It's the real thing. But Jacqueline—that doesn't mean the crazy kids have—I tell you I know Hogue wouldn't lose his head that far."

"Oh—I've hated myself—for being so suspicious," whispered Jacqueline. "But it scared me so. Rona is the apple of Dad's eye. He'd *kill* Hogue if—if—"

She wept quietly, but unrestrainedly.

"Don't cry, Jacqueline," he said, a little huskily. "I'll help you. Maybe it's not so bad."

"I'll stop. This is the first time—I've broken down," she said, wiping her eyes. "Your being *heah* with me—sharing it—standing so loyally by Hogue—just—"

"Quiet!" whispered Wade in her ear. "They're coming."

Wade saw a gliding shadow. It vanished—again appeared. Jacqueline saw it, too, for she clutched Wade's warning hand. Then a white slender form came out in the moonlight.

Suddenly Rona's slender form appeared to leap. She had heard what she expected. Running to the bench, she sat down with her back toward the moonlit aisle down which she expected Hogue to come.

Wade saw the red fire of a cigarette before he made out the tall cowboy. Hogue came on slowly and stealthily, and when he gained the aisle his cigarette

no longer burned. He peered into the shadow. Then he reached her, spoke in a low tender tone.

"You're late," she replied petulantly.

"I'm sorry. Just couldn't help it. Thet outfit an' your dad. Then Tex—"

"If you loved me you'd not let anyone, even Tex, keep you."

"Love you? My Gawd, girl, I'm mad about you."

"But, darling, I haven't been with you for three whole days," protested Rona passionately. "Now that Tex is back, you forget me."

"Rona, be sensible," said Hogue patiently. "I didn't forget you. I lied to Tex, tryin' to get out of somethin'. Told him I was sick."

"Get out of what?" queried Rona, her lovely head coming erect.

"Wal, he's leavin' for town in the mornin'. Takin' Hal, Kid, Bilt an' me. I tried to get out of it. Tex said sort of contemptuous thet I'd let him go to Holbrook when there was a shore chance he'd run into a fight. I just couldn't back out—"

"Fight?" cried Rona.

"Shore they'll be a fight. I wouldn't miss seein' Brandon fight Holbrook Kent for anythin' in the world."

Jacqueline gave a start. She gripped Wade's hand tight. A convulsed cry from Rona prevented any wild response in Wade to Jacqueline's fear for his life.

Rona had leaped up to throw her arms around Hogue's neck. Murmuring brokenly, incoherently, she pulled him to her, kissing him passionately, clasping him with frantic hands. Hogue lifted her off the ground and lavished on her all the wild caresses of which he was capable. When he put her down she seemed so spent and weak that she could not stand without his support.

"Rona. Some day—you'll make—me less than half—a man," he panted.

"But—I love you. Hogue, I love you. I'm frightened," she sobbed.

"Shore you are. But you gotta be game. Darlin', the chances are a hundred to one against my bein' hurt."

"But if you were shot—oh, Hogue, what'd I do?"

"I won't be shot. I'll hide, dodge—I'll be bulletproof."

"Listen," she cried excitedly, leaning back with her hands locked behind his neck. "When you 'get back this time, will you run off with me? To Winslow! And—and marry me there?"

"Aw, Rona!" gasped Hogue. "I can't do thet. I can't. Tex trusts me. Your dad trusts me. Your sister would despise me."

"Hogue, darling, there is no dishonor in eloping. We just cain't wait," replied the temptress.

"You don't know I was an outlaw—a rustler—when Tex got hold of me," said Hogue hoarsely.

"What?"

"I was. I'd have to wipe thet out, an' square the debt of cattle I stole—even if it wasn't for myself, before I ever, ever dare to ask Pencarrow for you. Now, unless you're gonna make it wuss for me, you'll change your tune."

"Forgive me, Hogue," she pleaded. "You've been won—der—full I don't care what you've been. I love you. I'll be true to you. . . . If only you'll not let that cold-blooded, flint and steel Brandon thrust you into the very teeth of death."

"Rona," replied Hogue, "you're all wrong about Tex. Shore he's got two sides to him."

"I like Tex. He fascinates me. But now I almost hate him. Hogue, he hasn't got a heart," retorted Rona.

"What makes you say that when I tell you he has?"

"Well, one reason, he's the only man who ever saw Jacqueline and was like the very rocks toward her. He has insulted her, snubbed her, avoided her. She likes that man, Hogue, and he hurt her."

"Wal, if that's one of your reasons I don't want to hear the others. When I found out I was turrible in love with you I went to Tex an' I told him. I confessed. An' I begged him to let me go before I made a fool of myself an' brought trouble to you. I told him I couldn't endure it. An' when he refused I called him much what you just called him. Then he told me what *he* was endurin'. From the very first sight of Jacqueline he had loved her—the first an' only girl he ever loved. But he had to hide it. He could never dream of her love—of havin' her—"

"Oh, how won—der—ful!" cried Rona. "That makes me see. What would Jacques say?"

"Lord only knows. Women are queer. Don't you ever tell her unless you want to lose me."

"I swear. I cross my heart. Hogue, you have lifted the burden there. But, darling, what will we *do*?"

"Wait. That's all. I've got the grandest chance that ever came to a no-good cowboy. Tex will help me. An' then with all that's black against me washed off an' forgotten—then I may dare to ask Pencarrow for the most precious creature Gawd ever put breath into."

"Oh, Hogue, you have made me ashamed—and glad—and happy all at once," said Rona. "What a brainless little wretch I am. But kiss me. I pledge myself. I am yours."

Their voices trailed into silence and their forms melted into the shadows.

Wade stood motionless, hardly breathing.

Jacqueline slipped her hand from his. For the moment she seemed concerned mostly with her sister's romance.

"They will never know what they have to forgive in me," she said. "Tex Brandon, your faith, your bigness put me to shame. I shall help them. I shall win Dad for them."

She walked out of the shade into the moonlight and stood by the bench where Rona had waited. Wade followed with hesitation.

"It's getting late," he said huskily.

"Yes. But I want to stay here to think—alone—"

"Then I'll go. Good night."

She stood white and still, her profile turned clear and beautiful in the moonlight. She did not look at him or offer her hand. Silently and swiftly he turned away.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gun Day

ONCE away from the softening influence of the Pencarrows, Wade caught up with his single and relentless purpose. He did not let his incredible luck undermine the imperative need for eternal vigilance. Spring brought more than balmy air and green grass to that range. It brought action for dark riders who had been holed up all winter.

How soon Rand Blue would learn of the fight in Red Gulch and the breaking of that large faction of the rustlers was a matter of conjecture for Wade. Rumor did not fly over muddy roads.

Wade found travel slow and irksome. When he rode horseback he had to confine his pace to that of the wagons. But up on the plateau the road had dried out, and the drivers made up for dragging mud. They reached Holbrook after dark and unhitched at the corrals just outside of town.

"We'll split up and slip into town," Wade said. "Hogue, you go alone. Kid, you and Bilt go together. Hal, you go alone, and be sure no one sees you. Keep in the dark. I'll follow. The idea is to find out if Blue's gang is in town before they find out we are. Caution is the word. We'll come back here and sleep in the wagons."

"Are we to drop in any saloons?" asked Kid Marshall.

"Yes. But one drink will do you. I won't give you any more specific orders. Use your heads."

Kinsey left the group and disappeared in the gloom. Hal stalked off, his head erect, impressive with importance.

"Wal, come on," said Kid to Bilt, who hung back.

"Doggone it, Boss, can't I call on my gurl for a minute?"

"Just the thing. Make it longer. Get all the town gossip. Now go."

They disappeared up the lane where Hal and Kinsey had preceded them. Wade rolled and smoked a cigarette. He was in no hurry. The hour was early, just after supper.

Wade left his coat, which was of dark hue, in the wagon. On former visits to Holbrook he had worn black. This time he had on a light shirt and an old tan sombrero. These, with the removal of his beard, would make him difficult to recognize at a glance as Tex Brandon.

Presently he sauntered slowly up

town. Lamps flared yellow and dim. Business was good. The saloons were crowded, and there were many hilarious cowboys jostling and jingling up and down the sidewalk.

A lanky high-booted cattleman, leaning against a hitching rail, invited Wade's interest. "Howdy," said Wade. "Just rolled in. What's the news about town?"

"Howdy stranger," replied the other with a keen glance. "Lots of news. Any special kind you want?"

"Not particular. Town 'pears pretty lively."

"Yes. First trip in for most cowboys an' all the teamsters. Stores all loaded up with new goods. Are you buyin', stranger?"

"Three wagonloads. I'm foreman for Pencarrow."

"Pencarrow? Reckon I don't know him. But I'm not an old stager around Holbrook."

"How are cattle sellin'?"

"Steady. Thirty dollars on the hoof. The big ranchers here are holdin' tight. Cattle will climb slowly for several years."

"That Lincoln County War over yet?"

"Hell no. It busted out fresh this spring."

"Thet so? What you hear about our own rustler factions?"

"I ain't heerd nothin'. It's about time, though, our ranges got to warm-in' up. This'll be a hot year for cattle thieves."

"Reckon it will," agreed Wade. "Well, I'll be moseyin' along."

Wade kept a sharp lookout for his own men, and satisfied himself that not one of them passed him. He ventured peeping in the saloons, where he was greeted by smoke and loud talk

and the odor of rum. Finally he went back to the wagons, where he smoked and waited.

Kinsey was the first to arrive. "Wide open cow town, Boss," he said. "Money an' booze thick as hops. I saw one doubtful-lookin' outfit, but the cowboys I asked didn't know them."

"I had a look uptown. Talked with one man. He said there was plenty of news, and asked what particular kind I wanted. I was a little leery of him."

"Here comes somebody—It's Kid. Over this way, Kid."

"Doggone! Gimme a cigarette. You hombres don't look worried none."

"What'd you get track of, Kid?" queried Wade.

"Not a damn thing to make us set up an' take notice. Town's full of cow-punchers. Plenty of cardsharps. An' a sprinklin' of rustlin' gents, if I know that brand."

"Did you see anything of Bilt?"

"Not after the locoed galoot seen Susie with some longlaggerd cow-puncher," responded Marshall with a deep laugh.

"Kid, this is no time for girls," said Wade seriously.

"Boss, I know that. An' I gave Bilt a hunch. But he's plumb loco. He loves that lyin' little wench."

"Here he comes now," interposed Hogue.

Bilt's shuffling clinking step announced his approach. "Whar'n hell air you—all?" he growled.

"All here but Hal. Did you see him?"

"Nope. I didn't—see nothin'," replied Bilt.

"Hell you didn't," snapped Kid. "I just told the boss. An' he's sore."

"Tex, I was knocked off my saddle," explained Bilt. "Run into Susie with a handsome cowboy. He shore was the

dandy. I told her pronto that I wanted to see her alone. She said she was sorry but I'd have to wait. Wal, her gentleman friend crowed at me. I asked him polite who he was. An' he said Joe Steele, from Mariposa, one of Mason's riders. He was expectin' his boss on the ten-o'clock train from Winslow.

"I said sarcastic, 'Wal, your boss won't come on that train or any other. An', Mr. Steele,' I went on, 'he won't buy no more rustler cattle.'

"He yelped at that, but I shut him up an' asked him short an' sweet if he was packin' a gun. Steele told me he wasn't packin' no gun an' that if he was he wouldn't throw it on a jealous little runt like me. Not before a lady! Haw! Haw! So I swung on him, biff, biff, right on his handsome mug, an' left him layin' at Susie's feet."

"You did pretty well," said Wade. "I question the wisdom of telling Steele his boss would never buy any more rustled cattle. But let that go. Will Steele be hunting you up tomorrow?"

"If he's got any guts he will. Mebbe he was talkin' lofty before the girl."

A quick sharp footstep caught Wade's ear. He held up his hand. Hal arrived, pale with importance.

"Rand Blue—or Drake, as he's known—an' Holbrook Kent are in town," he announced coolly, breathing hard.

No one made any reply at the moment. Presently Kinsey coughed and said, "Ahuh. Good work, Hal. None of us got even a hunch."

"Tex, I went up one side of the street an' then down the other. Run plumb into McComb. He drew me back in the shadow. That mawnin' he'd been in the bank. He's a director now. An' he learned that Drake an' Kent were in town layin' pretty low. Drake went to the bank. He had four men with him.

He has a big sum of money. He had expected to meet Mason at Winslow. But Mason didn't come. That's what Drake told the cashier. Seemed pretty anxious."

"All right. My luck holds," returned Wade incisively. "Listen, boys. Tomorrow early hitch up and drive the three wagons up town. Go to Sloan's. They are friends of Pencarrow. Stick close together. Buy and pack this list of supplies pronto, but not to excite curiosity. Hogue, you hang around the front of the store. Keep your eye peeled. If I happen along don't notice me. I'll be taken for a stranger."

"Boss, has it struck you that Blue is far from his hole an' has only a few of his outfit with him?" queried Hogue.

"It has," returned Wade vehemently. "Boys, we're riding pretty. Crawl into the wagons and get some sleep. I'll walk a little, then turn in."

Wade awoke at daylight, and got up to join Kid Marshall and Kinsey, who were starting a fire and carrying water. They prepared breakfast right there in the corral. Hal was sound asleep and hard to awaken. While they ate, the sun came up over the red desert bluffs in the east.

"Boss, when we get the supplies all bought an' packed, what'll we do?" asked Kid Marshall.

"Wait for me," rejoined Wade. "Don't forget a pack of grub to eat on the way home. Reckon I'll shave my dirty face right now. Bilt, will you fetch me some hot water?"

Kinsey stood by while Wade removed a three-days growth of beard.

"Well, Hogue, what's on your mind?" queried Wade presently.

"Tex, I was thinkin' Holbrook Kent won't know me, either. Would you let me meet him instead of you?"

"No, cowboy, I wouldn't."

"Wal, I didn't expect you would. But I'm tellin' you—I'm gonna stick by you every damn minute this heah day."

"Oh, you are? Against orders?"

"Tex, I thought it out last night. I cain't do it no more than you'd let me. It's somethin' I feel, but cain't explain. Shore I know you don't run a hell of a risk. But it's not thet. There's a chance you know, an' I ought to be beside, you. Kid said the same thing an' thet if I didn't he would."

"Then let Kid go with me."

"Nope. I can beat Kid to a gun an' thet entitles me to come first."

"But, Hogue, suppose we'd run into Kent with Blue's outfit and we'd both be killed? Then who'd take my place at Cedar Ranch?"

"Boss, I reckon thet if you an' I run into this whole outfit today—an' do get bored—wal, it'd be the end of Blue, too. An' thet means anyone could run Pencarrow's ranch from then on."

"Hogue, I could give you a reason why you should let Kid take the risk with me."

"No, you couldn't."

"Pard, I was out under the pines the other night in the moonlight—"

"No matter," interrupted Kinsey, his voice ringing. "Forget thet, an' anythin' else but the job at hand."

"Right!" ejaculated Wade. "Let's argue no more. Stick an extra gun in your left hip pocket, as I'll do. And roll them a bit to loosen up your hands."

Wade secured a second gun from his pack and retiring to a secluded shed behind the stable he spent a few moments in deliberate practice.

Upon returning to the wagons he briefly repeated his orders to the cowboys, then strode off toward town. Kinsey caught up with him, and taking a



position on his left side a step apart, maintained that place without further ado.

The main street of Holbrook presented early-morning activities. Riders were coming in, singly and in groups; loaded wagons moved out toward the range; stores and saloons were open, and the sidewalks showed loungers and pedestrians.

Wade took a good while to travel leisurely down one side of the street. But lounge along as he did, he was all eyes. He crossed to see the three Pencarrow wagons pull up to Sloan's and the cowboys roll off the seats, cigarettes smoking, their sombreros cocked sidewise, their movements leisurely.

Wade did not need Kinsey's slight hint to espy a group of men standing at the rail in front of the Range Well, the main saloon in town. Only one of these idlers had he ever seen before. Wade was trying to place him when the saloon door swung.

Several men strolled out, joking among themselves. The foremost was a stout ruddy-faced fellow in his shirt sleeves. He wore a star on his vest. This group did not exactly block Wade's way, but he halted some steps back.

Then a little man came out, guardedly, it appeared to Wade. He had bright sharp eyes like gimlets. Instinc-

tively Wade recognized him as Holbrook Kent. His companion, a lanky uncouth rider, Wade had seen before. At sight of Wade he froze.

"Hey, who're you?" called the sheriff to Wade blusteringly. An intense curiosity appeared in Kent's eyes.

"Howdy, Kent," said Wade with cool effrontery.

"You got the best of me," returned the gunman gruffly.

"Sure I have. I had it on Mason and Harrobin, too."

"What!" bit out Kent.

"Yes. And before nightfall your big pard Drake will swing. But you'll never see it, Kent."

"Hell you say? An' who're—"

"That's Pencarrow's foreman," yelled the rider wildly. "Brandon?"

With ring of spur and scrape of boot Kent's comrades spread to right and left, leaving the principals in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Mason won't be here to meet you, Kent—but I am!" called Wade.

The little gunman hesitated only an instant—that appreciable fraction of time it took to react from surprise. Then with a hiss he reached for his gun. He had it coming up when Wade's shot destroyed the action. The little man fell, lifeless before he flopped to the sidewalk.

Wade wheeled with his smoking gun low. "Friend of Kent's, eh?"

"Not particular," choked out the sheriff, ghastly of face.

Wade backed against the wall, where Kinsey joined him. The four men guardedly left the wall to move forward, still aghast, fastening eyes of amazement and incredulity upon the dead Kent. Clatter of boots sounded up and down the saloon, and the adjoining stores. Wade missed no newcomer,

while he still held the eyes of this sheriff and his companions. He saw Bilt and Kid approaching, and Hal, white-faced with a strained look.

"Boss, he's Sam Hiles, sheriff down Winslow way, an' not so damn much," drawled Hogue.

At that juncture Kid Marshall and Bilt Wood came sidling in between the gathering crowd and the wall. They got inside the circle but did not at once line up with Hogue. Kid's glittering eyes took in Kent on the sidewalk, Wade backed against the wall, his gun still in his hand. Then they swerved to the sheriff and the others.

"Hiles, are you a friend of Kent's?" repeated Wade sharply.

"I said not particular. I'm sheriff of this county. But I'll say Holbrook had many friends hyar."

"Did they know he was hand in glove with a cow thief?"

"Who? Holbrook Kent? Say, you're drunk or crazy."

"Declare yourself, Hiles," demanded Wade coldly. "You've no call on the law against me. It was self-defense. And if you don't clear me I'll consider you one of Kent's many friends."

"Wal, you can consider an' be damned. An' if you don't rustle, I'll arrest you."

"Rustle? That would be a familiar word with you—along with the rest of Kent's many friends."

"What you mean?" rasped Hiles, turning green.

"I mean this. There's a crooked ring in Holbrook, and I'll bet you belong to it."

"Crooked ring? Brandon you're talkin' heap brave with Kent daid there an' you with the drop on me."

"Crooked ring, I said. You're one who profits from it directly or indirectly.

Holbrook Kent was the right-hand man of Band Drake. And Band Drake is Rand Blue. He's here to meet Mason, the cattle buyer from Mariposa. Mason buys rustled cattle. Hiles, you've got a crook right here with you now That rider!"

Wade pointed his gun at the man who had recognized him. "He was in the outfit when I shot Urba for trying to rob Pencarrow."

"I don't know him," replied the sheriff.

"Maybe you don't. All the same if I run across him again I'll bore him. And you bet we're going to ransack this town for Drake."

"By Gawd, man, you're a bold one, whoever you are," replied Hiles hoarsely. "Mason will have you run out of Arizona for thet."

"No, not Mason!" retorted Wade. "Hiles, you and your town crowd, and your range neighbors, take this and swallow it—gentlemen, cattle buyer Mason will never buy another head of stock—or try to draw his gun on a better man. Harrobin we hanged! And we're going to hang his pardner Band Drake, otherwise Blue. The day of this rustler combine is done."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rope Day

THOUGH he had little fear that Blue would make a break to escape by daylight, Wade sent Hal to the highest roof in Holbrook, there to watch, while he and his cowboys ranged about like hounds on the scent.

"Show me thet geezer who called us

a half-breed outfit," Kid Marshall kept calling out, as he prodded this and that pedestrian with his rifle.

Wade beat locked doors with his rifle butt until they were opened.

"You may be honest," he said to merchants, clerks, bartenders, even to white-faced women. "Sure, we know most of you *are* honest. But if you won't help you must permit us to find Rand Blue and his rustlers."

The main street of Holbrook became empty of its customary movement. Holbrook Kent lay dead where he had fallen.

Wade, lean-faced and pale, like a wolf, led his three cowboys on that hunt. They entered every building on that street, searched high and low, in lofts and cellars, in grain bins and storerooms, in stables. When the day was done, only the private houses remained unsearched. Hal had not seen a single horseman ride away from town.

But when night fell Susie came weeping to Bilt Wood, almost falling at his feet. "Bilt—that cowboy Steele—was one of them," she sobbed. "He hid Drake—an' three other men—in our house—scared Pa an' Ma half to death. When it got dark, they took a sack—of food an' things—an' left. Pa heard our horses kicking—in the corral. Soon as he dared he went out. They'd gone—with only two saddles."

"Which way'd they go?"

"South, on the Pine Mound road."

"Where'n hell else could they go?" queried Kinsey scornfully. "Back to their hole-up! Tex, it's sixty miles to Pine Mound an' the road's bad. Not cut off. Rocks an' mud, dark as hell. Four men on farm hosses with two saddles!"

"Boss, you can head them off," added Kid Marshall exultantly.

"Fork your hawss, Tex," chimed in

Bilt. "Ride for home, you hangin' son of a gun! We'll foller with the wagons. You can make the ranch before daybreak. Bust in on the boys. Take Miss Jackie's fast hawsses. Ride Pen yourself, an' set Hicks to haid off Blue."

"Boys, you all must be mind readers," flashed Wade, grimly.

"Oh, Tex, let me go with you?" begged Hal, wild-eyed.

"Pard, I'd like to go, too, but heah I cain't," drawled Hogue. "You won't need me."

"Rustle, boys, I'm off," said Wade, and turned to run down the vacant dark street.

The only man Wade encountered in his hurry down the main street was Holbrook Kent, lying as he had fallen, ghastly and stark in the moonlight. This time Wade stopped to take the gunman's gun. That the citizen of whom the town had boasted with pride should lie dead all day in the street proved the panic which had prevailed.

Wade arrived at the corrals out of breath from running. It took him a little while to find his horse Baldy, a big rangy roan, noted for his endurance. Wade saddled him and remembered to sheath his rifle. His extra gun and Kent's he put in the saddlebags, one on each side. Then mounting, he urged Baldy to a gallop.

At the outskirts of town Wade caught up with the wagons. He passed them without slowing down. Hal Pencarrow greeted him with a wild whoop.

"Ride thet hoss, Tex!" yelled Hogue.

"Fork him, cowboy!" added Kid Marshall.

The level road, pale in the moonlight, stretched ahead across the desert. Wade eased the horse to a lope, a gait Baldy could hold indefinitely over good ground.

At the river Wade slowed to a trot. Baldy went splashing across the shallow sand bars. The moonlight glistened on the frostlike margins of alkali. Beyond began the only ascent on that road to Cedar Range, a gradual climb for a mile through rocky country. Wade saved the horse. From the ridge he looked back to see the ragged black patch that was the town marked by a few lights.

From that point the road descended gradually. The roan settled to a steady lope.

The rustler, with his men, would expect pursuit on the Pine Mound road. But their calculations would begin from the next morning at the earliest. They would spare nothing on that night ride. On the morrow they would be within striking distance of their hiding place in the brakes.

Wade's plan was to head Blue off before he left the road. If that failed, however, it would only prolong the pursuit. Hicks would trail the rustlers to their lair.

The hours passed as swiftly as the miles. By midnight the rolling range of cedars and pines dropped away in front of Wade, a vast gray vale, pale and obscure under the moon. Lost somewhere in that basin grazed his herd of cattle.

When the dark hour before dawn lightened to gray, Wade was riding across the flat toward the ranch. Dawn soon followed, with ruddy streaks on the horizon. He galloped the last mile along the pasture lane, and on to the bunkhouse of the cowboys. Leaping off, he unclinchd the heaving Baldy, and threw the saddle with a flop.

Hicks appeared in the door with a gun in his hand.

"Wake the boys," Wade snapped.

"Hyar, you Injuns!" yelled Hicks. "Pile out! Boss hyar rarin' to go."

Wade led the steaming heaving roan to the pasture gate and turned him in.

The cowboys, with tousled hair, were getting into their boots.

"How many riders out?"

"Five. They'll be in at sunup."

"We won't wait. Listen, all of you. Rand Blue and three of his men left Holbrook at dark last night. Poorly mounted, two riding bareback. They'd hid from us all day. Do any of you know a cowboy named Steele, from Mariposa?"

"Sure. I rode with Steele. Fancy feller. He's in Mason's outfit," replied one of Aulsbrook's riders.

"Well, he's with Blue. It seems Steele beat Bilt out of his girl, Susie something. Bilt had a fight with Steele night before last. And that's how we came to find out where Blue hid all day. Susie came and told Bilt that Steele had hid Blue and the other men in her house."

"Was they hidin' from you, Boss?" queried Jerry curiously.

"They were. After I killed Kent, we treated the town pretty rough hunting for Blue. This fellow Steele forced Susie's folks to hide him and Blue and the other two till after dark. Then they escaped on farm horses, taking the Pine Mound road. It's our job to head them off."

"Take some ridin'," replied the half-breed.

"Then jump, all of you, Rustle Miss Jacqueline's horses. Saddle Pen for me while I stretch my legs. Make some strong coffee. Pack some meat and biscuits."

Before the sun tipped the gray sage with rose, Wade's riders were up on prancing fiery horses.

"Hicks, you lead. It'll be trail riding."

"I reckon. Shorter across country. But rough. We can beat that time."

"How far?"

"Thirty-odd miles."

"Where will Blue be heading for?"

"Somewhere in the brakes. Harrobin's Hole, they call it. Trail heads beyond Pine Mound."

"Blue will stay on the road as far as Pine Mound," asserted Wade grimly.

With clattering rhythmic beat of swift hoofs on the hard ground the spirited horses swept down the lane and out upon the reddening sage.

Hicks swerved off the flat into the cedars, on the trail Wade had ridden so often. It wound snakelike through the gray trees, giving up a ringing clatter from the iron hoofs.

From the cedar forest Hicks led into rocky country where he trotted his horse and walked him down into the canyon. On a sandy trail he spared the horse. Climbing out, he rode into the pine belt that reached all the way to Pine Mound. A bad trail for miles slowed down the cavalcade. An hour's tedious vigilant riding put behind the zone of rocks and gullies. Hicks left the trail to head into the main pine forest.

Hicks raced his horse through the forest, down the aisles, dodging branches, leaping logs. The best Wade could do was keep him in sight. And at last he lost the half-breed altogether. But presently Wade saw the road, and a moment later Hicks on foot, bending low, searching for tracks.

Wade pulled Pen to a halt and leaped off. And in another moment the cowboys came tearing to the road.

Wade took a look himself. Jerry sat his saddle lighting a cigarette.

"What you fellows lookin' for?" he

drawled. "There ain't been any hosses along here for days."

"Blue hasn't come along yet?" queried Wade.

"Not on this road."

"Boss, it's too soon, anyhow," added Strothers.

"We're not ten miles from Pine Mound," said Hicks.

"But men running for their lives do strange things," rejoined Wade. "Hicks, ride on ahead and be sure you see them first, if they do come. If not, find where they turned off. Go slow. We'll follow you."

It was significant that the half-breed started off leading his horse. Wade waited until he turned a bend out of sight, then cautioning the cowboys to be slow and quiet, he followed. They had proceeded in this way for a couple of miles when the sight of Hicks waiting made Wade's heart leap fiercely.

"Boss, I heerd somethin' like iron on stone," whispered Hicks. "So far I ain't shore. Get off an' we'll hide our hosses back aways."

This required a few moments, for Hicks went slowly and some distance back into the woods. "Fetch some ropes," ordered Wade grimly. They returned to the road.

"My hoss kept me from hearin'," said Hicks. "Now all of you be still."

He lay down in the middle of the road and spread himself comfortably with his ear to the ground.

The cowboys watched him with assurance in their intent glinting eyes. Cigarettes had been cast aside. In their standing and sitting postures there was a suggestion of strung readiness.

Hicks rose as if on springs. "Somebody comin'," he whispered. "Slow an' not fur off."

With noiseless steps the cowboys surrounded Wade.

"Six of you slip up along the road and hide," he said in a whisper. "Rest of you stay here."

Jerry and Strothers with four others melted into the green border of the road. Wade motioned some of those remaining to hide across the road. With Hicks and three others Wade took a like position on his side. He knelt behind some alder brush and pulling a scarf from his pocket he tied it round his face up to his eyes. Then he jerked his sombrero down and drew his gun.

They waited. Wade strained his ears in vain. Then he whispered to Hicks. The half-breed glided away, along the edge of the road, to the giant sycamore, from behind which he stealthily peeped. He drew back, appeared to think, and then took another and a longer look, after which he retraced his soft steps.

"Four riders," he whispered. "Blue an' a flashy cowboy ahead."

After what seemed an interminable period Wade heard voices before a thud of hoofs. They came closer, ceased for a moment; the pound of hoofs sounded just round the bend.

"Blue, you had money for Mason," rang out an angry voice, "an' some of thet was for me."

"How do I know that?" came the reply, deep, throaty, with a tone that sent fire along Wade's cold veins.

"I tell you. An' I want my share. Blue, I got you out of thet mess in Holbrook. But for me you'd decorated a tree."

"We're not out of it yet," growled Blue.

Two riders rounded the bend. The left one was a superbly built cowboy, young, his garb and the trappings of

his horse signifying the dandy. The horseman on the right presented a marked contrast to the cowboy.

Wade, with a remembered face and form vividly in his mind, did not at first glance recognize in this heavy-paunched, tawny-bearded man, the only traitor Simm Bell had ever harbored in his band.

The horses splashed into the brook by the road, jerking and bobbing their heads to lengthen their bridles. Then thirstily they drank. Steele looked back. Other horses were close.

"Blue, I want my share of that money," he demanded.

The rustler chief took off his sombrero to wipe his sweaty brow. "You can go to hell, Steele," he rasped out.

Wade then recognized the big eyes, the crafty look, the coarse visage that had once been handsome, and particularly the rough cutting voice. Rand Blue!

Wade drew a deep breath, then expelled it in a stentorian command: "*Hands up!*"

The bushes crashed on each side of the road to emit the cowboys, stony-faced and formidable with guns extended. At that moment the other two rustlers rounded the sycamore to pull frantically at their thirsty horses. Thudding footfalls behind them preceded the appearance of Jerry and Strothers.

"What is this?" demanded Blue hoarsely, his jaw wobbling.

"Raise your hands—*quick!*" yelled the half-breed, advancing with rifle held forward.

"Brandon's outfit!" shrieked Steele. His hands flashed low.

Hicks fired without raising the rifle. The cowboy lost action. His head sank forward so that his huge sombrero hid

his face. He fell over the neck of his horse, which, startled more by that than by the shot, plunged to let him fall into the brook.

Blue's hands went shakily aloft.

"No rope for me!" shouted the rustler farthest back, and he wheeled his horse to flee.

"Wait, boys, an' bore him!" called out Jerry.

The outlaw got a start, and his quickening hoofbeats rang down the road. Then gunshots blended in a roar. The rapid clip-clop ceased in a heavy crash of brush.

The fourth rustler spurred his frightened steed into a magnificent leap back of Blue. A second leap took him into the green, following by hissing bullets just a fraction of a second too late. Swift as a flash Hicks ran into the woods.

The cracking rush of a horse through thicket, a pound of hoofs, gathering speed ended in a single spiteful rifle shot.

"Rustle, boys!" commanded Wade.

Behind Blue a lasso flew out like an uncoiling snake to whip round the rustler and draw tight. A single pull dragged him off his horse into the brook. Other cowboys laid hold of the rope and dragged Blue over Steele's dead body, out into the road. Coughing, strangled by mud and water, the rustler got to his knees when a second noose whipped round him, pinioning his arms to his sides. Then the cowboys let him get up on his feet.

"Bran—don!" he gasped. "Which of you—is Brandon? Let me—off! I've money—more hidden! I'll pay handsome—leave the country!"

"Shet up," called a lean youth with eyes of blue flame, and he tossed a noose around the rustler's neck. He gave the rope a pull that nearly toppled

Blue. Then he tossed the other end of the long lasso over a wide arm of the sycamore.

"My—Gawd!" choked out the doomed man.

Wade leaped out of the brush.

"Brandon?—I can put a fortune in your way," hoarsely pleaded the rustler.

"Stand ready, boys!" shouted Wade in cold and ringing command. He advanced, strode up to Blue, peered into the convulsed face.

"Don't you know me, Blue?"

"Who—who? Hellsfire!"

Wade snatched off his mask and whispered, "Remember Simm Bell!"

The exiled Texan recognized Wade. Stricken to the point of collapse, he stared at an arisen ghost. Then he opened his gray lips once more.

But Wade lifted his hand and all Blue got out was a horrible strangled "Ag-gh!—" while he was jerked into the air like a grotesque jumping jack for the merciless cowboys to jibe at.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Surrender

WHILE Wade sat on a log, sweating and shuddering from the reaction to that hideous execution, the cowboys searched the dead rustlers and tied Blue on his saddle.

Jerry brought Wade a heavy money belt and a huge roll of greenbacks surprisingly clean and new. "I found these on Drake," he said. "Steele an' that oldish hombre were also well-heeled, accordin' to Strothers, who searched them."

"Tell Strothers to divide with you all."

They packed Blue to the outskirts of Pine Mound, where they hanged him on the notorious cottonwood tree. They tagged his slack figure with a paper bearing the word: RUSTLER.

Then the sleepy little hamlet of Pine Mound awakened to the end of the Drake-Harrobin regime of cattle stealing.

There were but few men in the old haunts of the rustlers and these were curly invited to prove why they should not be hanged alongside Rand Blue. Those who could not give satisfactory proof of the status they claimed were taken out to view the dead rustler chief and then given an hour to leave town. The Bozemans and other store and saloon keepers who had grown rich off the rustlers were told in blunt language to harbor no more cattle thieves.

The cowboys began to drink and grow hilarious. At their departure, which Wade had trouble in bringing about, they shot up the town. And when they rode past the swinging Blue—ghastly object for the villagers to flock to see—they riddled his body with bullets.

It was midafternoon when they finally headed their tired horses into the Cedar Range trail. Wade with Jerry in front of him brought up the rear of that singing, merry cavalcade. The sun set gold over the purple land and dusk had come before the cowboys settled quietly down to the long ride home.

Long before Wade reached the cedar flat that night, weary with physical and mental exertion, the insidious tempter began to whisper: take what is your due—the past is dead—your secret is safe. But he had strength still to drive

that devil out. It was an hallucination to imagine he had been safe or ever could be. Had not Rand Blue recognized him in that final appalling moment? Nothing could be surer than that Mahaffey, that hawk-eyed ranger, would know him on sight.

By keeping that fact before his consciousness, by fighting harder for Jacqueline Pencarrow in his hour of almost insupportable temptation than ever before, Wade vanquished the soft-voiced persuasive tempter.

That struggle left him spent. What best to do and how to do it had to be left until he recovered. Late that night he came upon the cowboys at the Pencarrow corrals and realized that he was home. Deaf to the solicitous Jerry, Wade flopped off Pen and staggered through the dark to his cabin.

Wade slept until late the next afternoon, and probably would have slept longer but for Elwood Lightfoot's onslaught upon the door.

Wade let him in.

"They all been tryin' to wake you," said the homesteader. "Jacque sent me. She's worried. It 'pears somebody peeped through the winder an' seen you layin' there an' reckoned you was dead."

"Elwood, I'm afraid I came through it very much alive," replied Wade thoughtfully.

"Anyone would reckon you was sorry. Tex, it was the greatest deal I ever seen pulled in all my years on the border. You can't escape the happiness of these good people."

"Elwood, I—I couldn't see Ja—any of them now. I must look like hell. Besides, I feel like a poisoned hound."

"Wal, thet ain't strange. But if you'll take a stiff drink an' clean up you'll begin to feel better. Then come down an' have supper with me."

"That's a good idea," replied Wade gratefully.

It was almost dusk when Wade walked down the trail to Lightfoot's ranch. The homesteader had supper ready. After eating they sat outside and smoked.

"Lightfoot, what'll I do with all this money?" asked Wade, suddenly finding his tongue without effort.

"What money?"

"I've got a nosebag full of greenbacks and gold," replied Wade, laughing grimly. "Harrobin had the money Mason paid him, and some of his own, I reckon. Those rustlers packed their ill-gotton gains around with them. Then Blue had a big sum on him. I got it all. What the cowboys found on the other rustlers they divided and it must have been plenty."

"Wal, I'll be doggoned," returned the homesteader gleefully. "Can you beat that? Send me an' Hogue down country to pay them cattlemen for their losses."

"I'll do that," said Wade, brightening. "Did I tell you?—Of course I did—about buying Aulsbrook out just after he'd been rustled clean. I've a ranch of my own. Of all the luck—if it is luck!"

"Luck? Humph, you don't know how lucky you are yet. With your range adjoinin' Pencarrow's, we can run as many cattle as we want. I'd send Strothers back there with his riders, throw a new herd in, an' figure on the rewards of virtue."

"Ha! Ha! That's a joke, Elwood. I spent the last of my money buying Aulsbrook out."

"I'll bet you won't be able to pay back a quarter of thet money you got off the rustlers. If Mason paid Harro-

bin five dollars a head for thet eight thousand-odd rustled with Aulsbrook's, why there's forty thousand in one lump. An' you got the cattle an' the money too, barrin' what you paid Aulsbrook."

"You think the balance—after I pay those little ranchers down there—is rightfully mine?"

"Wal, I should smile I do. Pencarrow agrees. Harrobin an' Drake had other resources."

"I haven't counted it yet," rejoined Wade with a little laugh.

Wade slept that night under the open shelter beside the brook and awoke at sunrise with the dark and somber mood fading like a nightmare. Lightfoot went up early to the ranch leaving Wade to his own devices.

He spent the day along the shady rim where the brook took its amber-white leap into the canyon. In renouncing all that he might selfishly have gained, he discovered an amazing abundance left by which to live. His wants would be few. There could never be too much time on his hands. These eventful years at Cedar Ranch had seen him insensibly drawn to the purple desert, the gray cedar range, the Redwall canyons, the mellow gold-lit glades where the streams glided, the fragrant dry forests.

Next day Hogue and Hal invaded Wade's retreat. They talked and speculated and looked ahead with a vision that was spirited in Hal and touching in Hogue.

"Hogue, I mustn't forget to tell you I'm sending you down country to make good the cattle losses of these ranchers," said Wade.

"Not me you ain't sendin'," declared Hogue. "Pencarrow has called for all his neighbors, even to the Tonto, to

come with their proof. He's shore not goin' to let anyone impose on you."

Wade walked to the foot of the trail with his friends.

"Pard, won't you come on up?" asked Hogue.

"No. Maybe tomorrow."

"Rona sent her love," added Hal anxiously. "An' she said to tell you that if you didn't come soon she'd mosey down after you. An' Jacque—well, she's pale. She doesn't smile an' her eyes are too big for her face. Please come up, Tex."

"You're a couple of locoed kids," retorted Wade harshly, furious that the red blood burned his cheek.

"See here, Boss," drawled Hogue keenly, his eyes narrowed. "Now you got me straightened out an' my boys, an' Pencarrow on his feet, an' Rona an' Hal happy—an' Jacque a ghost of her old self—you wouldn't double-cross us all, would you, an' leave us stumped?"

Wade fled before the warm light in the cowboy's eyes and the suspicious and damning content of his query. For that was what Wade had made up his mind to do. He was not sure of his strength if he once saw Jacqueline again. These loving fools would have her ill on his account, worn pale through fear for him. They would take her gratitude, her strong sense of what the Pencarrows owed him, as something deeper, and they would throw the girl into his arms.

He must take heed of this warning. He drove himself to the realization that he dared not tarry longer at Cedar Ranch. The old conflict began all over again. After dark he went back to the ranch, only to return, harrassed, torn by conflicting emotions.

"What's on yore mind, son?" asked the homesteader.

"I wish to God I could tell you."

"I reckon I can guess. Do you want my advice?"

"No, friend, I'm beyond advice. I know what to do. But I've been a coward."

"Wall! wall! Ain't you thinkin' too much about yourself? After all, these people believe in you."

"That makes the hell."

"But what people believe is true."

Wade rushed out into the moonlit night. To stay longer with this kindly man would be to confess the guilt that harrowed his soul. He could have told Lightfoot, but he feared counsel and wisdom that might deflect him from his prescribed course.

Next day he went back to the ranch, his old cool self, as inexorable in the purpose he had set himself as the doom he had meted out to Pencarrow's enemies. The day proved to be a full one. Wade had to meet the cattlemen who had called at Pencarrow's invitation. Their losses did not aggregate a third of the sum Wade had found upon the rustlers. Again he felt defeated. He could not escape a fortune. But he eluded the burden, the dread of the past in a few words to Pencarrow: "Here, partner, take this for safekeeping."

The visitors consumed most of the day, and the cowboys the rest. None of them wanted to leave Cedar Ranch.



Wade surrendered the problem to Kinsey and Strothers. He was no longer foreman. He laughed at their perplexities. Once Rona waved to him from the porch and when he waved back, she boldly threw him kisses.

At sunset, when he came out of his cabin to mount Pen, he felt impelled to glance up at Jacqueline's window. Sight of her when he had not expected it gave him a wrench. She waved something white—a handkerchief—no, it was an envelope. A letter! He doffed his sombrero gaily and rode toward the cowboys' camp with death in his soul.

With the visiting cattlemen and cowboys, Pencarrow's outfit had a merry time of it at supper. That gave Wade opportunity to listen and watch, and take his farewell of Hal and Hogue, of the volatile Kid and the somber half-breed, of all these riders who meant more to him than they had ever dreamed.

In the early dusk he rode back to his cabin. He meant to take Pen with him—the one and only thing he exacted from the Pencarrows. The full moon had just peeped over the black mountain. He must hurry. What was it that he wanted from his cabin? He sat down to think. The moment had come for his departure and his heart seemed about to burst.

All at once he felt something smooth and cool under his hand upon the blanket of his bed. It was an envelope. The feel of it, the meaning of it transfixed him for an instant. This was the note Jacqueline had waved at him from her window. She had put it there.

Wade's hands, in moments of peril steady as rocks, shook like aspen leaves as he lighted the lamp. What had she written? He felt carried along in a swift current. Fumbling at the envelope to

tear it open, he found it unsealed. He read with eyes that blurred.

Dear Tex;

You will find me waiting for you at the bench in the pines where Rona used to meet Hogue. They have graduated to the living-room, with Dad's consent.

I would not attempt to tell you in a letter how I feel about what you have done for us. If you have imagination enough you may realize something of what awaits you by magnifying all we saw there one night in the moonlight.

But I must hasten to let you know that you take too tragically what you suppose is my attitude—and that of all of us for that matter—toward you after the terrible things you have done. At first, it did sicken me, frighten me to see you kill, and to think of it afterward. But that wore away.

I know you would have come to me at once if you had not feared this. But you should have come, for I would have helped you, comforted you. Only such a man as you are could have saved Dad, and all of us, not to say the other families on this wild range. I would not have you the least different.

But you have stayed away from me too long. I am dying for love of you.

Jacqueline.

Wade tried to read the note a second time. But he could not see. He found himself erect, tense like a man mortally stricken, but glorying in the blade that had pierced his vitals. He was lost. He had tarried too long. All his struggle and fall and rise must go for naught. An incredulous rapture, like a flood, waved over his whirling thoughts.

He went forth from the cabin like a man pursued by furies. But as he strode on, faster and faster toward the

pine-clad slope, these voices of conscience left off pursuit. He seemed to be driven to hear the truth of written words and to take his course from that.

He reached the pines. The moon was not high enough to light up the aisles between the trees. To the last instant he did not expect to find Jacqueline. But a white form arose from the bench, and advanced into the little open glade to meet him. Jacqueline!

Wade rushed to envelop her. "Jacqueline!" he cried hoarsely.

He crushed her to his breast, then he held her away from him, with strong and shaking hands pressing down her black hair, holding her face to the moonlight. It was indeed pale and thin, but lovely with its smile and the great dark eyes, shining with love.

"Why did you—not come to me?" she whispered, her bare arms sliding to clasp his neck.

"No—matter now," he said thickly. "It's too late—if you love me."

"I have been dying of love for you."

"I have worshiped you from the first. I have tried to die for you. I bore a charmed life. They couldn't kill me. Jacqueline, be sure—"

"I *am* sure now, thank heaven, that you do love me," she cried, awakening. "And I can be myself. Oh, I always doubted that terrible cowboy."

"He told the truth, child."

"But *you* never told me."

"I did not dare."

"Do you think I care for what your past has been?" she queried passionately, her arms tightening. "You need say only one more word to make me the happiest girl in all this West."

"You'll be—my wife?" he whispered brokenly, carried away.

"I will, my dearest," she whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY

No More Shadows

A YEAR more rolled by. Summer came again to Cedar Range—a summer marked by abundant rain and

grass that greened the knolls and flats from the majestic mountains down to the desert.

Cattlemen had their first year of prosperity in that isolated section of Arizona. Pencarrow's cowboys burned the C.R.B. brand on five thousand new calves! And other ranchers on the range multiplied their herds in like proportion.

The remnants of the several rustler bands that had fared like robber barons vanished as if by magic. Pine Mound dwindled to a deserted village and the road that led from it to Holbrook became a trail overgrown with weeds. From Sycamore Canyon to Harrobin's old hiding-place in the brakes this fading road was said to be haunted. Cowboys made use of other trails. Around the campfires of the range, and far into other grazing country, stories were told about the hanging of the rustlers, and that Band Drake, or Rand Blue, had never been cut down from the wide-spreading cottonwood on the trail near Pine Mound. They told uncanny tales. There were no rustlers left to cut down this ghastly thing and the honest cowmen who passed that way let it remain there like a scarecrow in the fields. They told how the buzzards and the crows picked the carcass clean of flesh and left a belted and booted skeleton to sway in the wind and rattle its bones and jingle its spurs.

The day of the rustler on that range

was done. Homesteaders and cattlemen, most of them Texans, moved into the vast unsettled country to the south.

As notoriety and greatness had been thrust upon Tex Brandon, so were prosperity and respect, and the regard of an increasing population. Wade had surrendered with outward grace to the inevitable. But on lonely rides and in the dark hours he contended with a sleepless remorse, and an abiding dread.

When June came he had been married to Jacqueline for a year, and a baby Jacqueline had just arrived at Cedar Ranch. Pencarrow was a proud grandfather. In the happiness of that time he consented to the engagement of Rona to Hogue Kinsey.

It would have been impossible for Wade not to have reveled in all this happiness. He had lived to bless the one gift that had developed out of his hard years in Texas. He shared this happiness and no one could have divined his secret haunting fears.

But there was a step on his trail. He had heard it when he was alone, riding in the dusk, and sometimes when he sat beside the open fire on winter nights. It would catch up with him some day. Until that fateful time he accepted the homage of the Pencarrows and their neighbors, and he clung to Jacqueline's love with a reverent awe and a hidden pitiful hope.

Often he thought of the gunmen and outlaws who had abandoned a locality or a gang of comrades to disappear and never be heard of again. That had come to be a favorite thought of Wade's. He had personally known several men like that. What had happened to them? Perhaps they had gone to other places, joined other bands under other names. But it was conceivable

that one here and there might have abandoned the old evil life and made a new one that had elements of good. Wade had done this. He wondered if it would be just and right of fate to track him down now, and in punishing him for an erring past wreck the happiness of a wife and mother.

One morning when little Jacqueline was two weeks old Wade returned from a visit to Lightfoot's ranch. He was thinking of the probable hundred tons of alfalfa that would be cut from the homesteader's rich acres this summer. As he turned Pen toward the corrals he happened to see a group of saddled and packed horses resting by the pine knoll.

His heart leaped to his throat. The horsemen lounging there, talking to the cowboys, could be no other than Texas Rangers. He had seen rangers too often ever to be deceived. And a blind terrific fury and fear possessed him. These passed over him like a wave. No more flight for Wade Holden! He had never shed a ranger's blood and he never would. If this were the end he would meet it with the courage that had come to him.

In another moment he turned Pen toward the house, his one thought for Jacqueline. What a passion of regret stormed his soul! He might have told her long ago—might have spared her shock, if not heartbreak and shame. But he had never been able to face the thought of telling her the truth—of losing the incredible esteem in which she held him. Too late! It all rushed over him now and but for her he would have welcomed death.

A powerful horse, with saddle, trap-pings, bags and rifle such as were used by Texas Rangers, stood bridle down before the porch. In a single leap Wade

was down, to stride up on the porch, into the living-room. A big sombrero and dusty gloves lay on the table. He heard voices. Pencarrow's and then a deeper, harder one.

Wade stood an instant like stone. He had to steel himself against two terrific forces—the ruthless will to kill and the more insupportable need to be the way Jacqueline believed him. That was the most cruel moment of his whole life. How strange and incomprehensible that Jacqueline broke it with a happy little laugh!

"Baby favors my husband," she said proudly.

"Wal, lass, I can shore recognize some Pencarrow heah, an' a whole lot of yore Spanish," drawled her father.

"Dad, please have Captain Mahaffey stay to lunch," Jacqueline went on. "Tex will be back then."

Mahaffey! His had been the step upon the trail. Ride the man down! Always Wade had known—and yet had risked his fool's paradise! But even now Wade found comfort in the fact that it had not all been for himself. Never for his own love, his own peace of mind, his own skin! And the truth upheld him. It would be Tex Brandon and not Wade Holden that Mahaffey would meet.

Wade stepped into the bedroom. The gold sunshine flooded through the white-curtained windows. Jacqueline sat propped up on pillows, the pearl tint of her lovely face, the soft dark splendor of her wonderful eyes, never before so beautiful. The baby lay gurgling beside her. Pencarrow stood on the far side of the bed.

On the nearer side to Wade, as he entered, sat a square-shouldered man with iron-gray hair, with his back to the door. It struck Wade then how

strange it was that a Texas Ranger captain, famous for riding down notorious criminals, should sit with his back toward any door!

"Heah he is now," cried Jacqueline, with a blush that still came for Wade on occasions. "Darling, we have a visitor from Texas. Captain Mahaffey, this is my husband."

The big man stood up and turned around. Mahaffey indeed—the iron-jawed, hawk-eyed ranger—a little grayer and grimmer, his visage seamed and lined with the records of his stern life.

"Howdy, Captain," said Wade with cool and easy graciousness. "I haven't been away from Texas long enough to have forgotten your name."

"Howdy, Brandon," replied Mahaffey. "I've heahed of you all the way across. Let me shake yore hand."

The lightning leaped to his gray eyes as he extended his hand. Wade met it. What was the ranger's game? Oh! The old Texas chivalry toward a woman! Mahaffey would make his arrest outside.

"Wal, now," he went on. "Seems like I've felt hands like this one before. Soft most as a woman's—velvet over steel! Like my old friends Buck Duane, Wes Hardin, King Fisher, an' all thet outfit, you don't chop wood or otherwise mistreat this right member."

"I never used to," replied Wade with a laugh. "But my gun days are over. I'll come yet to chopping wood—or perhaps even breaking stone. Mahaffey, did you by any chance shake with Billy the Kid on the way across?"

"No, wuss luck. For a Texas Ranger, I shore had a weakness for Billy. He was killed not long ago by Pat Garrett."

"No!" exclaimed Wade.

"It happened at Pete Maxwell's in

Lincoln. Garrett, the sheriff, an' his deputies were on Billy's track. They missed him. But at night when Garrett sat in the dark talkin' to Maxwell, Billy came in the door. Maxwell had been his friend. Billy asked who the stranger was, instead of shootin' first. Pat recognized his voice an' bored him."

"Well!—Who'd ever have guessed such an end for Billy the Kid," exclaimed Wade.

"None of us can figure what our ends will be," replied the ranger.

"Heah, you bloodthirsty men of the draw, never mind such talk!" retorted Jacqueline. "Babies are more important than guns. Look at this one!"

"Wal, thank Gawd, they air," replied Mahaffey heartily, as he bent to let the little Jacqueline take a final squeeze at his finger. When he stood up again, he appeared a softer, stranger Mahaffey, one without that piercing gray fire of eye.

"Brandon, Pencarrow heah told me about you an' yore work on this range. I never heahed the beat of it unless thet job of Buck Duane's—when he joined Cheseldine's outfit in the Big Bend, an' cleaned them out, even to the great Poggin. But Buck carries a lot of lead even to this day an' you didn't get even a bullet burn."

"That's the miracle," admitted Wade. "I owe it to Jacqueline."

"Wal, I reckon. Air you shore you appreciate her?"

"God knows I do—as greatly as I don't deserve her," replied Wade poignantly.

"Brandon, a man can never tell what's in him till a good woman brings it out. Stand by what you jest said all yore life."

Wade could not speak. His mind seemed to receive with startling vividness, but could give out no response.

"Good-by, mother an' baby," went on Mahaffey. "I shore am the happier for meetin' you."

The ranger strode out, with Pencarrow following.

"Cain't you stay for lunch, Captain?" asked the rancher.

"Sorry, Pencarrow. But it's early—an' I'll be on my way. I'm damn glad to meet you, an' tell you I hadn't nothin' to do with killin' yore brother Glenn. I'm tellin' you all us rangers air not—"

They passed out of hearing. Wade found sense in his nerves and muscles, and he sat down beside Jacqueline, to peer out at the purple Arizona range. What was it that had happened? He seemed to be shut out of the sepulcher of his mind. Inside that locked chamber—faces of the old years—his father—a dark stern ghost this strange Mahaffey—the strife and agony of his struggle—seemed to try to burst their confines to explain that quick retreating footstep.

Jacqueline gazed up at him with dim wet eyes. There was something about to happen. But the unreality possessed him. A ring of ironshod hoofs on the court outside! The ranger was riding away. Mahaffey—he whose clarion voice broke through the wall of mind—*Ride the Man Down!*

"Wade—Wade," whispered Jacqueline. "He knew you."

"My God! What did—you—call me?" gasped Wade. This was another and an unbearable nightmare. But Jacqueline lay there, white and convulsed of face, her dark eyes eloquent with love and pity.

"I called you—Wade," she went on brokenly. "My husband. You are Wade Holden. You are the boy whom I saved

long ago—that night in the canyon—saved from this very Mahaffey. I always knew you—yet was never sure until that night—when you came back with the new cowboys—and I met you coming around the tent into the fire-light. Oh, Wade, darling—all the time I've known."

"*Jacqueline!* And you loved me—married me?" cried Wade hoarsely, falling to his knees beside the bed.

"Yes. I loved you—married you," she whispered. "I would never have told you but for that ranger's coming. He knew you, Wade. He was heah to arrest you—take you back to Texas. He never guessed that I knew you were Wade Holden—and as he listened to Dad and me—slowly strangely softening. Oh, it was beautiful to see—*He* knew you, Wade. Did you not divine that?"

"Yes. I—saw," choked Wade.

"But you did not betray yourself. He has gone, big with *his* secret. *That* gave me right and reason to tell my secret—Whatever you did in the past it is atoned for. Mahaffey—that stern, hardlipped man of law—he removed the stigma. You are free, Wade."

"Oh, yes—free of him—and that footstep on my trail. But can I be of that other—the fortune my father gave me—robber's money!—the use I put it to—to help your father?"

"You saved that through all the years of your outlawry?" she asked wonderingly.

"Yes. Saved it like a miser. But it was money I could never have returned. Where it came from God only knows."

"Wade, I could have forgiven and forgotten that without Captain Mahaffey's help," said Jacqueline with sad and persuasive eloquence. "But *he* represents the law. *He* forgave it. The good you have done far outweighs the bad. That is the answer—he will forget."

"Brandon is my middle name," said Wade, lifting his head. "It was my mother's."

"Jacqueline Pencarrow Brandon—that *is* pretty. Lift her up to the window, dear, and let's look out over the range."

Wade gazed a long time before the dimness left his eyes. Then he realized that something beside a footstep had followed along his wandering trail. It was that which, abided in mother and babe. They were his to hold, to keep, to grow by, together with the endless range out there, with its blue flats and green knolls, its yellow-walled canyons, and the dim red shadows in the desert distance.

THE END



An Original ZGWM Fact Feature

Hard Times Behind Them

By W. H. HUTCHINSON



ON THE SURFACE, they seemed an ill-matched pair of land pirates. Jim Beckwourth was a squat, scarred mulatto from Virginia with powerful shoulders and the disposition of a wounded bobcat. Thomas Smith was a lean Kentuckian who had amputated his own leg after an Indian ball had smashed it below the knee. Beneath the surface, though, they had many things in common.

Both of them had iron in their belly. Both were master mountain men, veterans of twenty years apiece in the cutthroat business of trapping beaver, and this in itself was proof positive of their right to survive. Both men were on the sunset side of forty and both were victims of technological unemployment.

The beaver streams were trapped out and the market for beaver pelves, once at six dollars the pelt, had gone to glory when the "silk topper" replac-

ed the "tall beaver" as the acme of masculine fashion. Not even the hard-won skill, the experience in survival, from their wilderness faring could bring these two hairy *hivernants* more than enough for a small drunk when they sold their packs of furs after a year's trapping. Jim Beckwourth and Tom Smith were facing an economic enemy more deadly than the Blackfeet. In the language of their kind, *they were eating poor bull!*

They met their problem head-on, as the mountain men met most opposition, when chance threw them together in the game-rich country of southeastern Utah. Jim Beckwourth had come up from Taos seeking something to turn a profit. Tom Smith was living with the Utes, who called him *Waheto-co*, man-with-one-leg. The two met, talked, and solved their problem in a time-honored way—they decided to go to California. And this was almost ten years before the gold rush.

Pegleg Smith spoke long and earnestly to his Ute brothers. Jim Beckwourth harangued the warriors in the sweeping gestures of the sign language and lost none of his Indian savvy in the process. The Utes listened and were impressed. Tom Smith they knew, Beckwourth they knew by reputation—he was called "Bloody Arm" by the Crows.

When the speeches were finished, Beckwourth and Pegleg had allies for their venture. And there were no better horsemen, not even the Comanche, than the short full-bodied Mountain Utes, whose women were clean and had a way with elk hides that made them softer to wear than glove leather.

The cavalcade pulled out to strike the Old Spanish Trail that ran from Santa Fé to Los Angeles. The trail was neither old, nor Spanish—an American named Wolfskill laid it out in the early 1830s; it gained its name from the trading caravans that annually plodded across its desert distances to trade the *serapes* and *colchas* of New Mexico for the livestock of California.

Beckwourth and Pegleg took it easy, on themselves, their horses, and their Utes, but they covered distance just the same. When they crossed the rugged Wasatch Range, into the submarginal lands of the Digger Indians, Pegleg wanted to capture a few and sell them for slaves to the *Californios*. They didn't do it—maybe because Beckwourth didn't like the idea of being a slave trader—and they forged steadily west past the headwaters of the Santa Clara to the boiling spring called *Las Vegas de Quintana*, the hot-spot of Nevada by Boulder Dam today.

They shoved off across the dread Mohave Desert, steering by the *tinajas*,

the desert tanks, with sonorous Spanish names like *Agua Tomaso*, *Ojo de Archilette*, and *Agua Escarbada*. The dry bed of the Mohave River led them up the eastern slope of the San Bernardino Range, that protected southern California from the desert, and they camped in Summit Valley where the range tipped over to the west. Here Pegleg and the Utes made themselves comfortable and inconspicuous.

Joshua sent six spies into the land of Canaan, but Jim Beckwourth rode alone down the western slope into the box canyon called Cajon. At the mouth of the canyon, he turned west along a pleasant valley between the San Gabriel Mountains and the Santa Ana Range until he came to *Rancho del Chino*, the baronial holdings of Isaac Williams.

Isaac Williams, called Don Julian by his adopted people, had trapped west with Ewing Young in 1832. When Young and his trappers, including a boy named Christopher Carson, moved on, Williams stayed in California to better his condition in life. He married a daughter of the Lugo family, and in time old Don Antonio Lugo made him half owner of *Rancho Chino*. The huge adobe *casa major* was both fortress and nerve center for his vast operations. Clustered around it were barns, shearing sheds, corrals, a grist mill, a wine press, and the 'dobe *casitas* of his laborers and *vagueros*. Orchards, vineyards and tilled fields spread away from it on all sides, and the damp bottom lands of the Santa Ana River made wonderful grazing for fine cattle, blood horses and imported sheep.

Over and above all this, Ike Williams's hospitality was as generous as his lands. So Jim Beckwourth rode in

to *Rancho Chino* and was made welcome after the custom of California before the *gringos* overran it.

Now Jim may have been a mulatto, and a tough hombre to boot, but he was no ignoramus, no uncouth specimen of the frontier. When Jim lived in Denver, many years later, the *Rocky Mountain News* reported him as being "a polished gentleman." Add this personality facet to his picturesque appearance and his undoubted ability to tell tall tales about Jim Beckwourth, and there is little wonder that he made his play and made it stick.

Like all masterpieces of authentic lying, Jim based his story on a hard core of undubitable fact. He mentioned the decline of the beaver trade, and said he had come to California, to investigate the possibilities of hunting sea-otter along the coast. Many of his old *compadres* from the beaver streams were hunting sea-otter under license from the governor of California, and Jim had heard that they got forty dollars a skin. Waghl! That beat beaver plews!

Don Julian gave Jim a courteous ear and much valuable information as to where to go and whom to see about sea-otter. With his purpose well-established, and his stay at *Rancho Chino* to vouch for him, Jim spent what time he needed getting his own information. He rode slowly and calmly about the countryside, sizing up each rancho, its livestock and its owners, from Chino clear down to Santa Margarita y Las Flores, below San Juan Capistrano. When he had the information he want-

ed, and the lay of the land, Jim turned his horse toward Cajon Canyon and made far-apart tracks.

Pegleg and the Utes listened long and earnestly to Jim when he rode into Summit Valley, and they memorized the maps he drew in the dirt with a crooked forefinger. Thereafter, when darkness was shot with starshine, the cavalcade twisted down the trail into California and separated.

Some hectic few days later, a dust cloud boiled up above the San Gabriel valley and choked the entrance to Cajon Canyon. Hard-bitten Ute warriors with fresh mementoes at their bridles raced along the strung-out column at point, swing, and drag. Jim Beckwourth and Pegleg Smith rode at the tail of the column, a little to one side, out of the dust, with their long rifles balanced across their saddle bows and wary eyes cocked on the back trail. When they crossed Cajon Pass, the open door to California and the escape hatch for those who were in a hurry, the column swirled down the eastern slope with nothing between them and Bent's Fort on the Arkansas but distance, and this was no hazard to such as they.

At Bent's Fort, they knew they would find a ready market for their take from California. The proceeds would solve their shortness of purse, wet their whistles, and take them off the list of unemployed. Jim Beckwourth and Pegleg Smith had stolen three thousand head of horses from California in one bunch.

Waghl! It beat beaver plews!



Strangers in the Evening

By GIFF CHESHIRE

MARLOW'S IDEAL is one of self-sufficiency, but sometimes you need help to achieve that. A fine tale of a man and what he believes.



MANY things stirred in Marlow's mind as he watched the action at the upper end of the bottom. He stood on the ridge above his homestead, his rifle over his arm, after a short scout in pursuit of a deer that had appeared on the mountainside above his cabin. It had escaped him, and now his interest was wholly occupied by the scene below.

The rider whipped out of the brush, following the old game trail, and pull-

ed down his horse in confusion. For a moment he sat there, staring down toward the cabin.

In the way of a man much alone, Marlow spoke aloud: "Running. It scared him to find a settler back here. I hope the jeebow keeps right on going."

The rider halted only for an instant, then came on slowly. Like he aimed to stop. Marlow scowled. He had seen him higher on the ridge, riding fast then.

This was far from the beaten trails to Jacksonville and the other gold camps. A man just wouldn't have any sensible reason for riding through this country. Or any good one. A few times Marlow had had passers-by whose motives were just the opposite. Good or bad, he didn't like company. He didn't want to be bothered.

He started down the slope at an easy, swinging gait that still made time. He wasn't a hating man, but he had never had much liking for another, either. A man of thirty, self-raised so to speak, didn't have much feeling of fellowship left in him.

Marlow knew there were plenty of fine people in the world. He just hadn't run across many. He hadn't developed much interest in hunting them up. The kind he had known had engendered in him a strong desire to go it alone. That was the simplest and safest thing. Though he had neighbors, he hadn't invited visitors. He had a homestead, and he aimed to run it.

He crossed the bottom, displeased by this development. He had a fundamental philosophy, as a man who keeps to himself has time to work out. What a man got had to come from inside himself, from his heart and head, and it had to flow out through his own back and hands. Life had beaten that into Marlow beyond forgetting or even neglecting. And there were plenty of people ready to benefit by what he produced. A man with sense packed off finally to where he wasn't troubled.

Marlow found satisfaction out here in the mountains, a law and order in the wildness about him superior to what he had found among men. He could work with that regularity, study and understand it, plan and toil and make it yield what he wanted. A man

could call that a religion, Marlow guessed, for it gratified a deep hunger in him—a hunger for self-sufficiency.

The oncoming rider had slowed his horse to a walk, and was moving thoughtfully along the open river bottom. Marlow reached his stump-filled yard and stood watching him. The man was armed, but that meant little in this back country. He would be hungry, and Marlow thought of the supper he had already started, a good one of elk roast, Irish potatoes, and biscuits, for he always ate well.

He recognized the feeling stirring in him as conscience, bidding him to offer hospitality. The stranger would be welcome to eat, but the pause would make it mandatory to put him up for the night. Marlow kept thinking of that first impression, the man's moment of confusion when he caught sight of the cabin after his fast ride along the ridge. Marlow didn't like that; he decided against any show of friendliness at all.

He went into the cabin, catching his supper's hot, rich smells at the door, and stood his rifle in a corner. Though he had made a sufficiency for himself here, it was not abundance. His root cellar held a winter's store of truck from his garden, and the cured hams and sides from a hog he had bought to raise and butcher. He had a span of oxen for his plow and wagon, a heifer that would calve in another month to give him milk and cheese and butter. He had a flintlock rifle and single-action revolver, and the rest lay in his own back, hands, and head.

Marlow came to the door when the stranger pulled up outside. The man was thin, much younger than Marlow had estimated, scarcely more than a kid. He looked at Marlow with open, level eyes, and the settler could sense

no bad in them. Marlow pegged him at around twenty and wondered why he was riding the back trails and what had turned him uncertain back there. The horse was unshod, sore-footed, played out.

"Howdy," the boy said. Then, obviously trying not to, he turned a look back over his shoulder, along the trail.

Marlow didn't like that, and it set the decision in him. "You're out of your way, ain't you?"

The boy wet his lips and smiled. He was good-looking, and there was a merry cast to his features for a moment. "I'm Syl Vespers. Riding from Red Bluff to Jacksonville. Got smart and thought this was a short cut. It sure gave me a long rough ride."

Something did, Marlow thought. Yet it took an honest man to offer his name, unless this Vespers was trying to be artful and disarming. Marlow decided to stand pat.

"They call me Marlow. Jacksonville's a long piece from here, but there's a settlement after Sterling. A man can follow the crick, even at night."

He was staring, suddenly. Three more horses broke out of the brush up the river, the way Vespers had come, and Marlow had not noticed them on the ridge top. They didn't hesitate. They crowded their horses. It looked as if they had almost caught what they were after, and Marlow remembered his own situation. He had no taste for four overnight guests—much less than for one.

He watched Vespers turn to stare in the same direction. It was less surprise than resignation that came over the kid's face. Vespers swung down but made no move to extract the rifle in his saddle boot. This eased Marlow. He

didn't want a fracas in his own doorway.

Vespers stood by his horse, watching. Once he looked at Marlow, about to say something, then decided against it. Marlow didn't speak, for another man's business was not his. He looked at the horse. There wasn't anything left in it. Vespers knew that and accepted it. But he wasn't going to make a fight.

Marlow was tense, feeling a touch of human sympathy, which he had never lacked. In a dry voice he said, "Friends of yours?"

"I don't know who the devil they are," Vespers said. "But I can tell you what—" He broke it off. "Never mind."

The riders came on swiftly, Vespers and Marlow both watching them.

"Well, a man plays out his string," Vespers said softly.

Without knowing quite why, Marlow said, "Stand up to 'em, kid. Two's more than one. It'll make 'em think."

"Thanks," Vespers said.

Marlow regretted the impulse when he thought it over. He knew nothing about this situation, and taking a piece of it could only bring him trouble. A man's eyes and open manner weren't enough to make a stand on. Marlow had known disarming people before, who showed color finally, color a man didn't like. But he hadn't promised anything beyond lending his presence to a sort of bluff.

Life had taught Marlow to be detached. When a man wanted nothing more than the ability to do for himself completely he found himself too busy to take on the cares of others. Marlow hated dependency, and he frowned on it in others. He wasn't selfish; he was all too aware of a quick response to real distress. But he knew too many who made their own troubles, then turned

serenely to another for help. He had no idea as to why this Vespers was in trouble. But somewhere he had made a mistake, which made it his own fault and his strictly personal problem.

But even as he reminded himself of his beliefs, a feeling welled in Marlow, and he knew he was going to help this youngster to whatever extent he could. It distressed him more than anything, for he suspected what the feeling was. He had been a long time alone out here. This strange attraction to Vespers and his plight disclosed a hunger for a man's own kind. If that still lived in him, Marlow thought, it revealed a crack in the self-sufficiency he had sought to build. Winter was just ahead, with its dark and depressing months. Did this mean they would be as—well, yes, as lonely as last winter had been?

Marlow said, "Bring your rifle into the cabin, kid."

"It ain't your trouble, Marlow," Vespers said, and it gave Marlow the shocked sense of the boy's having read his mind. Vespers seemed on the point of refusing, then withdrew the weapon from the boot. His shoulders were square as he stepped into the cabin.

Marlow was calm enough to look to his cooking supper. He took the roast and bread out of the clay oven built against one side of his big fireplace.

Vespers watched him with hungry interest, indulging for a moment in forgetting his troubles. The boy took position against the far wall where he could face and cover the door. Marlow waited with only a mild curiosity about it all, not wanting to get too interested in another man's predicament.

Through the open window and beyond a break in the brush he saw the others drawing near. They had slowed their mounts, riding leisurely, and the

settler suspected this was to conceal the urgency of their chase. Marlow didn't like this any better than he liked the manner in which Vespers had arrived.

Marlow stood in his doorway when the three rode up, aware that he made a forbidding figure with his long hair and worn buckskins, one arm stretched from sight indicating that it reached toward a rifle. The three stared at him, offered no greeting, obviously pondering why this backwoodsman had put their man behind him.

One swung down, a man with a rough, impatient movement, and stepped onto the porch. Marlow saw no symbols to indicate that they were lawmen. There were marks upon them, and a strong sense within himself suggested that they were quite the opposite, specimens of the lawless breed who ran the back trails of the Siskiyou and Klamaths.

The man said, "Howdy, neighbor. You got a friend of ours in there, though he might deny it right now. The kid got mad at us. Pouted off by himself. We want to patch it up again."

One of the mounted ones sniffed and said, "Something good's cooking in there, Sands. Let's eat."

Sands regarded Marlow, the expression in his eyes roughening. "We'll eat if our good friend here's got the decency to invite us. Maybe even if he ain't. Settler, how about putting us up for a night? While we make peace talk with the kid."

Marlow said, "No room. And no spare grub. There's another homestead down two-three miles. It's a big cabin, and they like company. I don't."

He began to sense that the bluff wasn't going to work. These men were determined. Marlow guessed they were

in the habit of having their own way.

"Joe, put the horses in the barn," Sands said. "The kid's, too. Fork 'em hay, and if there's any grain they can stand it."

He regarded Marlow steadily, speaking over his shoulder, his eyes narrow and brittle. He wore a holstered revolver, and he seemed to challenge Marlow to beat its speed trying to catch up his rifle.

Sands and Vespers could see each other, Marlow knew. He also knew his own position made it impossible for the kid to try to use his weapon. Marlow hung for a moment in deep thought. He had assumed this, interposing himself before Vespers. The decision was up to him. Marlow sighed. He had done his best to run a bluff, but he didn't want a fracas built out of other men's quarrels wrecking his peace and his hard-won possessions.

He counseled himself, *Easy. You can feel your way through this. They won't ring you into it unless you stay goaty.*

A rider caught the bridles of the two riderless horses, the whole moving out of sight at the corner of the cabin. Marlow stepped away from the door and his rifle, thus giving his assent with only a small outward show of distaste. Sands grinned, looking on into the obscurity of the interior.

"Kid, either put that gun with the settler's or make your play. You've seen my work. It's up to you to decide if your'n's better." He grinned. "And remember your big friend may get in the way of a piece of lead."

He was serene, supremely confident, his hand still apart from the grips of his gun. Marlow didn't like that little show a bit.

Marlow looked at Vespers. The boy's face was slack with resignation, but

there was steadiness in his body when he walked over and put his rifle beside Marlow's. The settler realized there was a healthy fear there, but it was under control.

Marlow felt a touch of pity. Maybe Vespers was calling himself a fool now for letting himself be overtaken at a place where he had someone else to consider. But it was too late now. Marlow saw Vespers accepting that, trying to think his way out. Just as Marlow meant to feel his way through the crisis. The more he studied Vespers, the more Marlow liked him. He thought he was beginning to understand.

It was Vespers's own folly. *A man plays out his string*, the lad had said. He had probably been in league with these hardcases and changed his mind. The back-country gentry wouldn't stand for such desertions, the settler knew, when dangerous knowledge could thus be carried away. It had its own way of putting a stop to such things, a gunshot delivered with the aim of finality.

Marlow reasoned that Vespers would have explained it and asked help if he hadn't had something to conceal. Marlow was glad of his own restraint, which probably had saved him from the deepest of folly. Still, he was sorry for the kid.

Sands waited on the porch until the others came back from the barn, and they took their time about it. They came up excitedly, one calling, "Hey, Sands. This mountain man's got himself a fine saddler. He's got a fat heifer down behind the barn. I sure hanker for some fresh beef. And he's got a dugout full of everything a man can think of to eat. You been worrying about where to provision. Well, we found the place. And we can pack it on his horse."

Sands scowled and came through the door, realizing that this open, callous statement might be enough to drive Marlow toward his gun. Sands got between the rifles and the two men inside. When his companions came onto the porch, he said:

"Take those pieces and throw 'em into the river, Joe. This settler's got a six-shooter over there on the wall by his bunk. Get that, too."

One of the men obeyed, stepping wide of Marlow and Vespers when he came after the revolver. Vespers looked at Marlow with misery and apology in his eyes.

Marlow was sick at heart, cursing himself for not having ordered the kid on. It was too late now, and he was going to pay the price with his firearms, his horse and cow, and everything he had stored ahead for himself. He thought of the long while it had taken him to accumulate those things, and recklessness rose high in him.

He put it down as he had his other urges. A man prospered by working with things and not against them. That had become his religion. One that he had applied here in the wilderness to his advantage. He had believed in the principle, trusted it, and he still did. He would continue to feel his way.

Sands, reading this reaction, grinned at Marlow. "We've got nothing against you so far, settler. Just behave yourself and you'll be all right. We'll see. Meanwhile, let's eat." He looked at Vespers. "You just take it easy, kid. Tomorrow we ride on together. All friends again."

"You lay off of Marlow," Vespers said, "and I'll give you no trouble. I brought this onto him, and he was only trying to be decent."

"What Marlow gets is up to him,"

Sands said. He was thoughtful a moment, then added, "And up to you, of course." His eyes carried a warning.

Marlow got the import. Sands was telling Vespers not to divulge the reason for all this, which would automatically turn Marlow into a dangerous and doomed man. Marlow had a tightness in his throat, a hope that Vespers wouldn't break and do so just to ring in help on his plight. So far he hadn't, but if he had to endure this suspense until morning he might. Marlow began to give that a thoughtful worry.

He ate with the intruders because he was hungry and there was no point in disturbing routine. A meal prepared for one made poor pickings for five, and a man said, "The hell with starving in the midst of all this plenty," and went out to the root cellar. Marlow had never kept it locked. When the fellow returned he carried a ham. The other man set a skillet onto the fireplace grate, while the first began to carve up the ham.

"Sands, do we butcher that heifer?" one asked. "It'd be cool by morning, and we could have beef for breakfast. We could pack a quarter along."

Sands thought a moment, then shook his head. "Too much work. He's got plenty all ready to go."

Night came on, and Marlow saw that the hard ride across mountain country had put fatigue in his unwelcome guests. His hopes of discovering an opportunity to save his stores were shattered when finally Sands said, "Marlow, you and the kid can sleep solid tonight. One of us'll be awake to protect you. And we don't want any monkey business outta either one." He grinned. "One of us'll be using your bunk, settler, so you better find a soft spot on your floor."

Marlow slept very little. Time after time he shaped up a plan, only to have it fall apart. He regretted deeply now that he had not made his play while he had something of a chance. He had let that pass advisedly, so he had to accept what lay ahead.

By the time the intruders began to stir at daylight he had decided to stick to his plan and his principle and slide through with the least damage possible. A man had to work with wildness, whether in country or in humanity.

Sands's two companions sliced and fried the last of the ham for breakfast and used generously of Marlow's flour to make biscuits. Marlow watched the fruits of his hard labor disappear and pictured what inroads they would yet make when they departed. He was resigned to that. He had proved his self-sufficiency once and could again, charging this loss to the lesson learned.

Yet when Syl Vespers roused and shoved to a groggy stand Marlow had a new concern. The kid looked older by ten years. Marlow thought, *He might break and try to touch it off here where I'd have to help him.*

But Vespers didn't, all through breakfast, and he didn't when the men brought up the horses, Vespers's and Marlow's with them. Marlow swallowed. They had located his pack saddle. It was under a heavy burden, things they had taken from his cellar. It looked as if they had cleaned it out.

When Syl Vespers walked out of the cabin and mounted his horse, Marlow felt something squeeze his heart painfully.

Vespers grinned at him, saying, "Thanks, fellow. Wish I'd never brought it to you. But like Sands says, they're friends of mine. So I reckon I'm

of a feather. Hope what we took ain't cut into you bad enough to hurt."

"Shut up," Sands said and swung onto his horse. His two men followed.

Marlow watched them ride out, going back into the mountains. They might take Vespers far into them before they shot him, or they might wait only until they were beyond earshot of the cabin. But Marlow knew that Vespers was doomed to die before many hours had passed. That had been only too plain on the faces of all of them. Marlow pondered it, and this was the only thing that disturbed him now, for he had dismissed his horse and his produce completely. He had liked Vespers, whatever his past and whatever his foolishness.

Marlow came to a decision without actually weighing the situation or his chances of doing anything about it. Yet they were better odds than they had been at any time in the past twelve hours, for Sands and his cronies believed they had left a truckling backwoods settler, impotent and resigned, behind them. And Marlow knew that Vespers's parting words had been designed to put a face on it bland enough to exempt his friend from any last-moment spite or abuse. That was enough for Marlow, and he swung away from his cabin, his only weapon a hunting-knife which he had slipped into his belt.

He knew every bit of the country around his claim. By striking directly up the mountain he could come onto the ridge trail, which looped and probed the ravines. If he was fast enough he might get there ahead of them. Beyond that he did not plan, trusting to the spur of the moment. The only question was whether they would let Vespers live that long.

Marlow was thankful for his hard, lonely life here, for it had given him wind and stamina. He crossed the brushy bottom and struck swiftly up the hill, and he didn't slack pace until he was on the top. He knew he was ahead of the party, his only fear being for Vespers. He threw himself flat in the brush by the trail and lay there catching his breath and letting his trembling fatigue subside. He allowed himself only a few minutes, then rose and studied the terrain.

He selected a tree he could climb, which hung above the game trail. He went to it and lifted himself up into the lower limbs, pressing flat at his selected point. There was a long wait, moments when his mouth stood dry above an aching throat. But he had heard no gunshot. They would have to follow the trail this far, whatever direction they meant to take afterward.

Marlow's hand held his knife when he dropped, yelling, "Fan out of here, kid!"

He landed limply behind Sands, as a great cat might descend upon a deer. But he didn't drive the knife, for he had a distaste for such killing. He took Sands out of the saddle, both landing in a hard crash on the earth. It threw consternation and confusion into the bolting, scattering party, as Marlow had wanted. Sands's horse wheeled off up the trail.

Marlow saw that Vespers had ignored his order to light out and, instead, had jumped his horse toward a man, reaching from the saddle for its rider. But Marlow had his hands full and lost track of the ruction. He put the point of his knife at Sands's throat, growling, "Keep still," and reached for the man's still holstered gun.

He failed to get it. Another gun cracked behind him, the slug kicking up a pillar of dust by Marlow's head. In the same instant Sands jerked himself aside, rolling away from Marlow's knife. Marlow sailed after him.

Shoved up on an elbow, Sands got his gun free and fired blindly. It was a split second too soon, and the bullet sighed harmlessly past Marlow's ear. Then the settler's big hands closed on the man, jerking Sands to his feet. He batted him hard across the mouth, with a force that made the map's eyes show white for a second. A gun fired again, and something hooked into Marlow's buckskins without touching flesh. The settler closed a hand on the gun in Sands's grip, arresting it, and took a look about him.

The man Joe had swung down and stood beyond a wheeling horse, using it for shelter while he tried to get in a shot at Marlow. Beyond, Vespers and the other man were in a brawl on the ground, slamming, choking, rolling.

Sands growled, "Why, you tricky son! Didn't figure you had a ounce of fight in you!"

Marlow lunged into him, driving him down, and they rolled together, Marlow fighting to keep Sands's body between himself and Joe until he could get the gun he wanted. Sands slammed out, kicking and butting with his head, but Marlow held on.

In a moment he had the gun, and he whipped it savagely across Sands's head—two swipes, and the man lay still. Marlow climbed to his feet, panting. Joe had swung onto his horse again, not liking the look of things. He flung a shot at the settler just as Marlow fired, then Joe flopped out of the saddle.

Vespers rose from a still figure on the

ground. He had his man's gun in his hand, and his shirt was ripped off, his face scratched and bleeding. He staggered toward Marlow.

"Never was so surprised in my life. And I never was so glad of anything, either."

"You all right?" Marlow asked.

"A lot all rightier than I'd of been if you hadn't made that play."

They gathered the guns and brought their men together. Joe was dead, shot through the head, but Sands and the other were only beaten into insensibility.

Vespers swung onto the one horse he could catch and rounded up the others. Marlow wondered what the kid would do now.

As if reading the question in the settler's eyes, Vespers said, "Well, we better pack 'em down to your place, Marlow. Lock 'em in that root cellar of yours, maybe. Reckon you'll have to stand having 'em around long enough for me to send the law out from Jacksonville."

"The law?" Marlow said, staring.

Vespers gave him a slow grin. "Did you figure I was on their side of it? Hardly. And if I'd of told you what it was, they'd of tried to kill you along with me. That was all they wanted, to shut me up."

"None of my business even yet," Marlow said, but acknowledged he was curious.

Vespers was still grinning. "Took you for a man who liked it on his lonesome, but I got nothing to hide. It was one of them blunders a man can make and land plunk into boiling water. They held up a gold-dust runner over on the Yreka trail yesterday morning. They shot the poor devil down. The dust'll be there in Sands's saddlebags. It was

just my luck to be coming down them switchbacks from the other direction. Maybe you seen my horse ain't got any shoes. Been down on my luck lately, and he was the best I could buy in Red Bluff to ride through."

Marlow was grinning back now, the first time he had ever been so warmly drawn to another man. "For a tight-lipped cuss, you can sure be long-winded."

"It was quite a little caper. I heard the shooting and was fool enough to fog up to see what it was. Johnny to the rescue, maybe. They must of meant to kill that poor runner from the start, for they weren't masked. I got a good look at them—too good. Hadn't given 'em time to finish the job and clear out. They started throwing lead, and something give me a itch to hit off up a ravine, fast as my horse could dust it. Kept it up all day, barely staying out of range. They sure didn't aim for anybody to stay alive who could identify 'em."

They threw the bandits across the horses and took them down to the cabin. Sands and the other man had roused by the time they were locked in the root cellar, but showed no spunk beyond a steady, bitter cursing.

Vespers swung onto his horse and said, "Glad you got your horse and stuff back. They got good guns, so you can take your pick to replace what they threw in the river, like I done. I'll tell the story to the deputy marshal down in the gold camp. Reckon by now he's looking for the men who murdered and robbed the runner. He'll take the thing off your hands, and—well, thanks, fellow."

Marlow was staring at him. He felt no particular relief at having recovered his property. In fact he was con-

sious of a sense of loss, and it dawned on him that this was because Vespers was riding out. Deeper than that, he had a sense of satisfaction such as he had never found here in his wilderness storehouse. He knew suddenly what it came from, the fact that he had done a wholly unasked and unobliged thing for another.

Again Marlow made a fast decision. "Got any particular plans, Syl?"

"Well, I reckon I'll keep on hunting me a gold claim where a man can pan wages anyhow."

"Ever consider homesteading?"

"Guess I have. I come off of a farm. Marlow, there's only about one man in a hundred out here strikes it big. Most of us're lucky to earn our bacon and beans."

Marlow was thinking fast, running

entirely contrary to what he had always considered his grain. "Lot of good land open around here. Time yet to get a cabin up before winter. I got plenty of tools and grub for both till you could get going. Think it over. Then maybe you'll want to ride back out with the marshal."

"Want to?" Vespers eyes widened, a broad smile breaking on his lean face. "Marlow, scared as I was, I admired what you've got here. If you don't mind having somebody horn in on you, I'll sure be back with that marshal."

Marlow watched him ride off, then looked about him with satisfaction, at his rough cabin and stumpy land and wild environs. A man with hands, back, and head could do a lot with it.

With a good friend and neighbor, he could have self-sufficiency.

COW-COUNTRY SPANISH—A Western Quiz

By S. Omar Barker

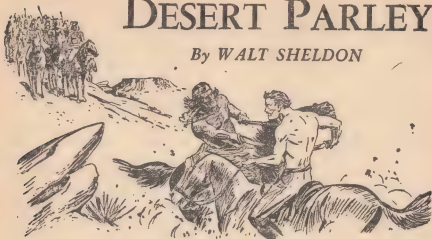
OF COURSE you know that "a buckaroo and his bronc" means "a cowboy and his horse." Probably you also know that "buckaroo" comes from the Spanish "vaquero" (vah- or bah-KAY-ro) and "bronc" is short for "bronco"—which some dictionaries still insist on misspelling "broncho," as in pneumonia. In fact, a lot of larrupin' cowboy lingo is Spanish in origin. Here's a little roundup of Spanish originals. Can you give the corresponding cowboy terms in familiar use on the Western range, plus their meanings? In some, the pronunciation offers a better clue than the spelling. *Vamos*. (Answers on page 133).

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Chaparreras (chap-pah-RAY-rrahs) | 11. Tapaderas (tap-pah-DAY-rahs) |
| 2. Cincha (SEEN-chah) | 12. Jaquima (HAH-kee-mah) |
| 3. Estampida (ess-tahm-PEE-thah) | 13. Juzgado (hooz-GAH-tho or hooz-GAH-'o) |
| 4. Lobo (LO-bo) | 14. Lazo (LAH-tho or LAH-ss0) |
| 5. Mesteno (may-STAYN-yo) | 15. Caballada (cah-bahl-YAH-thah) |
| 6. Cocinero (co-sec-NAY-ro) | 16. Quien sabe? (kee-AYN SAH-bay or -vay) |
| 7. Dale vuelta (DAH-lay VUAYL-tah) | 17. Mecate (may-CAH-tay) |
| 8. La reata (lay ray-AH-tah) | 18. Cuna (COO-nah) |
| 9. Sabe (SAH-bay or SAH-vay) | 19. Maguery (mah-GAY) |
| 10. Caballerango (cah-bahl-yay-RAHN-go) | 20. Fiador (fee-ah-DORE) |

PEACE OR WAR hangs in the balance as Sergeant Train and Silver Knife, blood brothers, meet in personal combat. First publication.

DESERT PARLEY

By WALT SHELDON



THE white man had his hand raised, elbows bent, fingers curled forward. The big yellow chevrons on his sleeve were stubborn—they refused to wrinkle with the rest of the blue cloth. He turned his gaze in a slow azimuth, meeting flat Navajo stares one by one.

There were five of them. They were dressed in long, colored shirts gathered at the middle with concha belts, floppy *canzoncillos* about their legs, and ankle-high moccasins. The leader wore a serape. He was the only one with a firearm—an ancient St. Louis Hawken—and he held this loosely and confidently across his pony's withers.

Sergeant Philip Train finally spoke. In stumbling Navajo he said, "A Zuni jest—to threaten one who is the blood brother of Silver Knife!"

He had to root for the words; in seven years he had forgotten much. He had forgotten, for instance, about trav-

eling along the ridges, and because he had come through this draw the Indians had trapped him. He doubted, however, that they knew about the unsigned treaty—the one for the commander at Fort Doniphan—in his saddlebag. This was probably simply a foraging party, or a group scouting for the main band. That, of course, wouldn't make them any less inclined to kill and mutilate a lone soldier—if only to express themselves.

The Navajo with the gun spoke. "The one who claims blood with Silver Knife wears the blue war dress of Long-Hair-Two-Tongue." He was a squat, heavy-browed, pock-marked man.

Train frowned for an answer to that. Long-Hair-Two-Tongue. He'd heard the Indian name for Captain Archibald Hollis before; Hollis commanded the outpost, Fort Doniphan, and it was there that Train was to deliver the draft of the treaty, then remain for duty.

He couldn't complain, he'd asked for it. For seven dull years he'd been placed as an instructor in Indian Warfare at West Point; he'd made a chigger nuisance of himself with the commandant—a soft-spoken Virginia Colonel named Lee—and somehow, miraculously, one day he'd been ordered back to the Department of New Mexico. The Hudson was wild and beautiful, but it was a toy landscape when one had known and loved *this* country.

Well, here he was. One sixteen-to-the-pound ball and a pinch of powder away from oblivion. His trump card in doubt—he couldn't be sure that this pock-marked fellow had ever heard of Silver Knife, although that tall brave had been quite a hero to his own tribe during Train's former visit. Train had pulled him out of the rapids above Rinconada one day, saved his life. On the rock bank they had sworn blood brotherhood in the Indian way—exchanging their possessions down to the last button.

The United States Army hadn't particularly appreciated it when Train had returned to the camp in full Navajo regalia. *Sergeant Train's deep interest in Indian customs, said the official paper, might conceivably interfere with his duties as a non-commissioned officer in the Department.*

Exile, then—although some would call it the opposite—and now, return. Now he could scarcely recall the singing Navajo tongue he had once spoken easily.

He thought hard, and he said, "Long-Hair-Two-Tongue wears the blue war dress with many others. Is it true that all eagles are the same because they wear feathers?" It didn't mean much, but it had the wild ring that Navajos like in speech.

The pock-marked Indian moved his Adam's apple. A sign—the aborigine was no more inscrutable than anyone else if you knew his sign. Train struggled to keep his own face rigid. It was a solid, square face, orange-skinned and with the barest touch of laughter lubricating the corners of the mouth, always. Philip Train wasn't sure why, but sometimes everything from cradle to grave struck him as slightly ridiculous and funny. He watched, and the Navajo lowered his weapon, swung his horse about so that it came alongside of Train's. A sudden grin crossed the Navajo's face. They believed him, then—

Pyang! Tch-keeeeeeeee!

The shot came from above, from the rim of the draw. Echoes, trapped, desperate, slammed from wall to wall. Train's horse reared and danced. The Indians swirled uncertainly about him until the pock-marked leader motioned them southward, crying, "*Hai! Hai!*" and took that direction himself.

Whang! Whang! Whang!

More shots. Jenks carbines, from the flat, saucy sound of them. More echoes, and now, as Train turned his eyes to the rim, he saw scarves of blue smoke drifting away from the piñon clumps. It all happened very quickly. There had been at least six shots by the time Train's feet hit the ground. He rolled behind a boulder.

Whang! Whang! Whang! The shots continued, but sporadically now.

He swung his head to the right and saw a Navajo drop forward to his horse's neck, jostle a while, then fall. Three others lay scattered about, one kicking and thrashing. The squat, pock-marked leader was disappearing through the southernmost entrance to the draw.

The squeaky blare of a field bugle came from the rim, sounding the notes of General Call—advance. After that it was very quiet and Train's nostrils detected the first bite of gunsmoke smell.

Train sat on the boulder and started to fill his clay pipe. He saw the mounted silhouettes pick their ways along the rim, and he waited while they descended to the floor of the draw in a series of sharp cutbacks.

Damn their buttons, he thought. Train, himself, might be blamed for their little slaughter among the Navajos. He'd joined the Army as a drummer boy at fifteen and he had a pension coming in five years and he meant to live in this country and trade with the Navajo when that came along. But the Navajo could have a long memory about things like this—

It was a small detachment that approached; one officer and eight men. Even before Train saw the officer's features clearly he guessed that it was Captain Archibald Hollis, himself. There was, first of all, the man's stiff, arrogant seat, and then there was the gleaming yellow hair flowing back over his shoulders. Long-Hair-Two-Tongue. Indian names could be short biographies.

Hollis had a broad smile. Train stood up and saluted at the regulation thirty paces. The officer rode a few more yards, then dismounted and stopped his horse in the same motion. A flashy maneuver.

"Well, well—you're Sergeant Train, of course. We didn't expect you so soon!"

Train performed the mental feat of sizing him up and keeping his own face blank so that it wouldn't be too obvious. A handsome man, in a soft-

lipped arrogant way; very fair-skinned, smoothly shaven, and a little overgraceful. He was the kind of man who would move well among prised chandeliers. He was perhaps thirty-five, the capillaries were just beginning to show around his cheeks and around his nostrils, heralding his next decade. His eyes were large and blue, very clear, very alive—he moved these now to glance at the fallen Indians.

"Very nice," he said. "Very nice, indeed—"

"I'd just about made friends with them, Cap'n, when your volley came," said Train quietly.

"Eh?" Hollis turned back to the Sergeant. He blinked rapidly. Then he frowned. "Sergeant, as far as I'm concerned *no* Indian is ever friendly. My command operates on that principle and you might as well learn it now."

"Oh," said Train non-committally.

He met Hollis's stare for another moment, then turned from it and stepped to the saddlebag. He found the large, red-sealed envelope. The other soldiers, meanwhile, had gathered about and some of them were examining the Navajo corpses. A corporal was jotting in a notebook. Train handed the envelope to the Captain.

"I'm supposed to deliver this. It's the treaty the General wants signed with the Navajos—"

"Good grief, *that* again," said Hollis, taking it. He stuffed it into his tunic without opening it or looking at it. "Will they never learn about these treaties? I'd like a promotion for each one that's been broken by the blood-thirsty devils. Signed the one with Donaciano, that Apache, myself—"

Train brought his head up. "Donaciano? I knew him, Cap'n, when I was here before. I heard he'd broke his

treaty. But it didn't surprise me. That treaty was forced on him—he was given a good licking and then made to sign it. An Indian don't figure he *ought* to keep a treaty like that."

"An Indian," Hollis said, casting his eyes about and talking more to the air than to Train, "understands only one kind of treatment. Force, and lots of it." He stepped out then toward the corporal who was making notes. "We'll ride on as soon as I have the details of this battle recorded."

"*Battle*, sir?" said Train, lifting the tuft of one eyebrow.

But Hollis was already out of ear-shot. Train frowned at his back. He was beginning to understand, now. Properly reported, styled in fine officialese, this little incident in the draw could very well be made to look, on paper, like a battle. They liked battles—victorious battles—back in Headquarters, and back in Washington, too. They were the stuff promotions and medals were made of.

Some time later the little detachment was pushing on, climbing the easy slope to the north. It was a clear day, full of sky, full of horizon, and there was none of the yellow haze of lower altitudes in the distance. Rumples plain stretched out ahead; earth red and ochre, dotted with blue sage or the bottle-green tufts of juniper. Train felt a fairly crazy desire to spur suddenly and ride into it, and feel the wind tug at his cheeks, and keep riding—riding—

Hollis interrupted his fantasy. The captain dropped back to his side abruptly, and pointed at the chalky blue battlements of the mountains ahead.

"Just a little way to the fort," he said pleasantly—it was the calculated good

humor of a man who wants to chat rather badly. "Might as well warn you, Train, it's not very fancy. And there'll be plenty of work for you, because I haven't another experienced noncom in the place. I'm still surprised that the Department saw fit to send you—seems they scarcely know we're up here at times."

He cleared his throat. "We've a queer situation up here. The Navajo claims this area, although he doesn't use it, devil his soul. Says he won't molest the settlers if we pull the troops out. Naturally we won't pull the troops out until he stops molesting the settlers. That's why Santa Fé wants the treaty, of course—and I suppose they'll be damned happy with us if we can get it signed."

He snorted. "Well, there's only one way to do it. Beat the Navajo down until he has no choice *but* to sign it."

"But the Navajo'll break a treaty like that first chance," said Train, frowning.

"Granted." Hollis nodded. He reached upward and adjusted the tilt of his hat. Then he chuckled. "But they won't be able to blame us for that, eh?"

"No, sir, I guess not," said Train thoughtfully. He kept staring straight ahead.

The detachment mounted a land-swell that was not unlike the backbone of an old dray horse. Below them, suddenly, a long valley—there was the fort. It was little more than a redoubt, properly speaking; a rectangle of adobe walls, a sand-bag breastwork, and a few *jacals* for offices and quarters. Far to the west the valley met the rim of a gorge, and beyond that was sage desert climbing slowly to the spine of the continental divide.

There was a group of men in an ar-

royo about three hundred yards from the fort. A moment later they saw sprawled and scattered bodies in the same place.

Hollis rose in the saddle momentarily to stare, then turned his head, swept his arm forward and cried, "Gallop—hurrrr!" He shot forward and the squad pounded along behind him.

In the arroyo white and startled faces turned to look. A pasty-faced private came running, stumbling. He saluted hastily at Hollis.

"The wood party," he chattered. "Th—they was out pickin' pine-yon—a pack o' the devils jumped 'em—"

"Good grief!" Hollis groaned. "I leave for a few hours, and this is what happens!" He turned to Train. "You see what they do to me? Thirty men and not another officer. Not a second lieutenant fresh from the Point. There'll be hell to pay for this! I'll be blamed—naturally." He turned to the corporal again. "How many? How many dead and injured?"

"F-Four, sir. No injured. That is—ain't no one alive to be injured." He looked about to be sick.

In the arroyo Train looked about him with his nostrils curled in distaste. The Navajo was not a scalper—but he had other and more vivid ideas of mutilation. It disgusted Train—yet he couldn't hate. You couldn't put white man's standards to the Navajo, any more than you could try a white man by medicine in a *kiva*.

The corporal was making notes again.

"Hello—what the devil's this?" came Hollis's voice.

Train turned. Hollis was pulling a deerskin-wrapped arrow from the ground.

Train walked toward him. He stared

at the thing, licked his dry lips and said, "That's a message, Cap'n. I've seen such before."

"A message, eh?" grunted Hollis. He unrolled the skin. "Pictures. And not very good ones, at that."

Train looked over the Captain's shoulder. He ran his gaze across the characters, saw the symbol at the bottom, and suddenly lifted his brows.

"Cap'n," he said slowly, "I believe I can read that for you—"

"Oh, really?" Hollis handed it to him. "Then do, by all means."

Train held it slightly to one side and pointed to the first of the characters. "It's a warning, Cap'n. These here stick figures in blue, with the spears—they're soldiers. That means us. Then you got the sun sign—the rising sun. Sure as the sun rises, you might say—"

"Look here, Train. Never mind the learned discussion. Just read the thing."

Train glanced upward, then back again. "All right," he said stiffly. "This says unless the soldiers leave Fort Doniphan in three days, they'll attack. A large party of 'em. It's signed by their war chief. They elect one for each campaign, like you probably know."

"Yes, yes. All right. Who's the war chief?"

Train took a hard breath and said, "His name's Silver Knife."

Hollis nodded and folded his arms and looked westward and said, "Well, I fancy we'll dull the edge of this fellow, Silver Knife, well enough—"

"Cap'n, I know this Silver Knife."

"Hm?" Hollis turned. "You know him?"

Train swallowed and looked directly into the Captain's eyes. "Yes. I sayed his life once—'cording to Indian ways, we're brothers."

"The devil you say!" Hollis pursed his lips in surprise.

"I might—I just might be able to parley with him about this."

"Parley? Reason with an Indian, Sergeant?"

"It's been done."

"Rot."

"Well, all I mean, Captain, is—it's worth a chance. Three or four hundred Navajos might just take this fort. Even if they don't there's going to be some good boys killed—killed and maybe worse. You know it'll be three days before we can get reinforcements from Santa Fe, and—"

"Sergeant," said Hollis slowly, keeping his blue eyes very blank and very open upon Train's face, "suppose you leave the grand strategy of this command to me? I can assure you that any attack on Fort Doniphan will be repulsed. I can assure you that some men will be killed. It frequently happens in battle, Sergeant—did you know that?"

Train's eyes grappled for a moment with the captain's. "Might it be, sir," he said, suddenly and softly, "that a battle would sure attract more notice in the Department than just a parley?"

Hollis's upper lip became tight and drawn. His nostrils worked in and out. His lids closed a bit on the blue orbs. "Sergeant Train," he said slowly, "you will consider yourself under technical arrest on a charge of insubordination. You will confine yourself to the limits of the fort, and I'll see that some duties are assigned to you. I've too few men to jail you right now, but we'll think about that after this attack. I might add, Sergeant, that a lot will depend upon your conduct during the engagement."

Train's skin felt hot and dry. His im-

pulse was to make a fist and throw it—hard—into the officer's pink-skinned face. But he'd been a soldier too long to allow that to happen. And there was the vision of that pension coming in a few short years—

He saluted and said, "Yes, sir," then turned slowly to get his horse and ride it to the fort.

Somewhere in the next forty-eight hours Train found his idea—but he wasn't sure just how it came about. It more or less grew on him. It came in the midst of all the hustle and bustle that were Hollis's preparations for the attack.

First, the captain ringed the place with sentries; he put them in small trenches and supplied them with signal rockets. Food rationing was begun immediately so that the barrels of salt pork and hard biscuit would last in case of siege. Two messengers were sent—by different routes—to Santa Fe, with word of the impending attack. Train carried out Hollis's plan to send the men scuttling to the breastworks at odd hours so that they would be well-drilled when the time came.

A squad was kept on reconnaissance most of the day. Train asked if he might lead that squad and Hollis smiled at him in a very suspicious way and said, "Sergeant, you're not to step outside the walls of this fort."

Train went back to his duties. He noticed that frequently the captain came to the door of his little cubbyhole quarters, peered out into the compound, and half-smiled in satisfaction when he saw Train still there.

Toward evening of the second day Train wandered to the gate and motioned for the guard to open it. To his surprise the guard stepped in front of

him with sloped arms, shook his head, and said, "Sorry, Sarge. Cap'n says you ain't to leave."

Train thought hard about it all that night; he was still turning it over in his mind when he dropped off to sleep. And in the morning, when he awoke, he had his answer. He walked to one of the recruits who was dressing, talked a bit, then did the same with the corporal in charge of the reconnaissance squad.

Eight dragoons rode from the gate that morning in the usual way, and the fifth man from the head of the column was Sergeant Philip Train in the coat of a private, collar rolled about his cheeks. The guard waved them on.

The rim of the gorge, several miles west, was the limit. The squad rode to this rim, skirted it for a while, then circled back—that was their usual patrol route. This morning Train paused where a narrow trail led down to the brown and yellow carpet of the gorge.

"This is where I leave," he told the surprised corporal. "And don't forget—none of you fellas know how I got out, if the captain asks."

"But you're not goin' out there all by your lonesome, Sarge—on the other side o' the gorge, there, that's plenty thick with Indians."

Train smiled and said, "I'm just drop-pin' in on a long-lost brother of mine."

The way down into the gorge was easy enough. And the stream that ran through it was swift, but fordable. Train had to make several tries, however, on the far wall. A fault in the rock finally appeared several miles to the south and this provided a small ascending ledge. He had to quirt the animal to keep it going.

Finally he was pushing through the endless sage desert on the other side

of the gorge. The steps of his horse became a dead rhythm, broken only by an occasional stumble or whinnying grunt. The sun's blast came through the thin sky. His mouth began to feel like cracked leather and he took a small swig from his canteen.

Shortly after midday he was hungry. He cast his eyes about until he spotted a mesquite patch, then rode to it and picked several handfuls of the long beans. He made a fire and boiled them in his beef can. While he squatted over the crackling, twist-grained sticks, he heard a slithering off to the right.

He darted his eyes in that direction and saw a sinuous, orange-brown shape leaving a rock. He drew his pistol and moved toward it. The snake turned, drew into a running S, and rattled at him. He shot its head off.

He skinned it with his trapper's knife—a Green River, the frontiersman called it, from the initials GR on its blade, letters that actually stood for George Rex—and then placed the chunks of gray meat around the fire to broil.

Train felt fine. He felt wild and he felt free and he felt taken to the bosom of the vast, open country. These were the things he had taught in his class on Indian Warfare at the Point: how to live off the land, how to fight the land and the beasts and the men it spawned without the proper weapons. This was what he loved to do best.

As he finished his meal he looked up and squinted toward the west. He thought, for a moment, that he had seen a glint on the mountainside ten, fifteen miles ahead. He nodded to himself. Silver Knife's warriors had probably spotted him long ago; he had counted on that. Now the smoke from his fire would surely signal his approach.

He hacked himself a slender and relatively straight branch before he returned to his horse, and he tied his white handkerchief to the end of this. He mounted and then rode away, resting his improvised flag of truce in the stirrup.

It was late afternoon when the two horsemen appeared over the rise and came to meet him.

Train pulled to a stop. He saw that they were Navajos, and there was something familiar about the squat, sturdy look of the one on the left. They came closer and Train suddenly recognized the bright green blouse, the scrape, and the long-barreled Hawken rifle of the Indian he had met in the draw.

Train frowned. So far, not so good. The Indians walked their mounts and approached him slowly. They were perhaps fifty yards away, now. He could begin to make out the features of the second horseman—the one who was taller and sat very lightly in the saddle.

Seven years it had been—

Recognition seeped through. Silver Knife, war chief of the Navajos. Tall—six-four, at least—brown as walnut juice, hard as quartz. Oiled and supple in every joint; none of your stiff, knotted white man's muscles here. A young man everywhere but the eyes, an easy and graceful man with a proud lift to his chin.

Train lifted his hand and said, "Brother."

Silver Knife didn't answer. His pony glided to a stop and he sat there, letting his smoldering eyes hold fast upon Train. Like many Navajo eyes they were close together—but they had no crafty look in them. They were alive, high-lighted, intelligent. He wore a long shirt of flaming red silk and a

belt thick with three-inch silver conchas about his middle. An ivory-handled knife hung from his belt, and a well-cleaned carbine rested in the saddle sling. About his neck there were a number of strings of turquoise and pendant from these a silver device resembling a cross of Lorraine. He kept his face as still as polished wood.

Train said, "Where I build a hogan, that is also the home of my brother—" "Hai!"

Silver Knife interrupted. His voice was rather thin and pitched on the edge of the high register. "We are no longer brothers. Eyes-In-The-Sun is now the brother of Long-Hair-Two-Tongue. He has set traps for my people. Four of my warriors lie where the buzzards pick at them—"

Train glanced quickly at the pock-marked Indian, and then back at Silver Knife again. "But I did not make this trap. I knew nothing of it."

"Hai," said Silver Knife again. He shook his head to show his disbelief.

Train frowned. He spoke softly, then, picking his words one by one. "There is a pact ready for the mark of Silver Knife. The blue warriors will be withdrawn from your country after three moons of peace."

"The blue warriors," said Silver Knife, "prove themselves of two tongues. If they were honorable men I would make a pact with them. Now I cannot. Now I must attack."

He turned his head suddenly, pushed a short, sharp cry from his diaphragm, and the rise behind him was abruptly alive with silhouetted horsemen. One hundred—two hundred—more than that, perhaps. Silver Knife raised his hand and they stayed there on the rise, shuffling a bit, raising tiny swirls of dust.

"Hear me, Silver Knifel" said Train. He made his voice oratorical in the Navajo way. He swept his hand along with his words. "Many will die in this attack. More of your people than blue warriors will die. You know that."

"I know that."

"I do not understand why you attack."

Silver Knife lifted his chin. "I have been chosen war chief. I take the way of honor."

"But you do not want your people to die."

"There is no other way."

"There is another way."

Train leaned forward and rested his hands on the pommel. Silver Knife stared back with a still motionless face.

Train said, "You have told me of your people, Silver Knife. Once, as brothers, we rode together over the desert, and you told me of the old heroes, you sang the old songs. One of these tales told of the war chief who fought his battles with single warriors armed only with knives, agreeing to do it this way with the enemy, and losing but one man instead of many—"

Silver Knife almost smiled. "Is there among the blue warriors a man who would meet me in single combat?"

Train nodded. "The man who has been your brother."

"You, Eyes-In-The-Sun?"

"You have cut our bonds. We are no longer brothers, and we may fight."

Silver Knife glanced briefly at his pock-marked companion, and then back over his shoulder as though to see over the rise. He dropped his hand to the sling that held his mesquite bow and quartz-tipped arrows. He withdrew an arrow. He took it in his strong, slender hands, snapped it, and handed the point to Train.

"If you walk from this field alive, the treaty will be signed by the war chief who takes my place. If you do not—we ride over your body, and attack the place of the blue warriors."

Train took the arrowhead and said, "It is done."

There were no more words; it was understood, now—and Silver Knife wheeled his horse and pounded back to where the warriors stood drawn along the ridge. The pock-marked Indian followed him. Train watched for a moment, then dismounted, tossed the reins over his horse's head, and after that began to remove his tunic.

There was no singing up on the ridge; no beating of drums. The Navajos drew their horses a little closer together, perhaps, and moved them a few yards down the slope. Up there Train could see Silver Knife also stripping to the waist.

In a moment both contestants were mounted again. They had put aside all of their arms except their knives—Silver Knife's ivory-handled blade, and Train's Green River. Silver Knife moved a few steps ahead of the line of horsemen and raised his hand. Train responded by raising his own.

And then both men spurred their mounts and charged toward each other.

Now, for the first time, Train began to doubt. Everything had happened too swiftly, too tautly before this to leave time for doubt. But now that he was aware of the thudding of hoofs on the dry earth below his stirrups, and now that he felt the wind of the charge on his cheek, and now that the steed was alive between his knees, pulling in smooth, galloping strokes that kept him firm in the saddle, hard to the cantel—now that all this had come

about, Train was suddenly not sure that he would be able to carry through his plan.

He swore at himself and told himself to relax, for most of his success would depend on his ability to do that. He had to face Silver Knife's blade—that was basic. He had to use his own Green River knife in his defense; he didn't want to die any more than anyone else with ordinary sense. To work his plan he had to risk more than getting killed—he had to risk killing his adversary. There would be no peace for him if he should do that, there would be no trading with the Navajos when his pension came. The treaty would be signed, of course; their word was good on that, but it would be much like the treaties Hollis brought about by force. It wasn't too likely to be honored for a very long time.

He was in the midst of these thoughts when Silver Knife's pony loomed big in his sight and became suddenly near and terribly alive.

Silver Knife's arm flashed—almost too quickly for the blade in his hand to be visible. It came up and forward; the weapon was being held with thumb and forefinger and thrust as a dueling sword is thrust.

Train dodged, not too little, not too much—just enough to make the blow miss and to keep his own balance. All of this happened in an instant as the horses came together, then broke again. Train wheeled his own mount to face the Navajo a second time.

Silver Knife charged him again. A few feet away he reined his horse upon another tack and passed Train on the off side, rather than the near. Train had expected it. He bent from the saddle and threw his head and shoulders under the line of Silver Knife's thrust this

time. As the Indian's arm came out, Train slashed it lightly and quickly with his own blade.

The Indian's momentum carried him past Train again, and now when Train turned for the next closure he saw the unmistakable look of surprise in Silver Knife's stiff way of sitting the pony, in the quick glances he threw at his lacerated forearm. He couldn't see the expression on the Navajo's face clearly, but once he was sure that Silver Knife lifted his head to peer at him in something close to amazement. This dodging ducking, Train knew, was not Silver Knife's general idea of knife-fighting. To grapple and slash would be more like it—hack away and victory to him who could stand it longest.

He waited for the war chief to charge again. He held the reins close to his midriff and kept his horse spread and sturdy. Silver Knife's mount came in weaving and turning, making it uncertain until the last moment which side would take the attack. He curved finally to the left.

Train twisted in the saddle to bring his knife arm across the horse's withers. He felt the sudden shock as the Indian pony's shoulder crashed into his own leg. He saw the ivory-handled knife come toward him again, and this time he moved both of his arms with lizard quickness. His left hand, open, slipped in under Silver Knife's blow and caught the Indian's elbow. It pushed upward at the same time Train's right forearm closed over the Indian's wrist and pushed down. The thrust was tangled and caught.

Train kept pushing; he rose in the stirrups and put the weight of his body behind it. Both men swayed for a

moment—the horses parted—and they fell to the ground together.

The fall destroyed Train's hold. He went for a moment to his hands and knees, scrambled upright again, and saw Silver Knife moving toward him in a crouch.

Train waited. He went into a crouch himself and he tensed every muscle so that he seemed about to spring. Silver Knife leaped forward, pumping his legs, when he came. Instead of springing to meet him, Train fell backward. Silver Knife's own momentum carried him forward and over Train. Train's knees bent, his boots came up, caught the Indian's middle and helped him to fly. As soon as Silver Knife left Train in his forward plunge, Train rolled swiftly. He got to his hands and knees then pushed upright. He met Silver Knife just as the Indian was getting to his feet again.

Train's fist, given bulk and hardness by the heavy handle of the Green River knife, arched forward. It struck Silver Knife's jaw, slightly to one side of its center. Silver Knife staggered backward for a step or two. Train followed up his blow with a hard jab to the Indian's bare torso. The Indian instinctively brought his arms there for protection. Again Train struck him with that bolstered fist. Again, and again . . .

Captain Archibald Hollis fixed a vitreous blue eye upon Sergeant Philip Train and said, "I'll give you exactly one minute, Sergeant, to make your excuses. And I warn you—there'll be a court martial no matter what you say. Fine example you've made for the men. I won't have insubordination—I won't have it, that's all!"

Train was in the cubbyhole against the wall of Fort Doniphan that served

as headquarters and living-space for the commandant. Hollis sat behind a desk improvised of scrap wood and pork barrels. He looked, as usual, recently shaved and altogether very poised. Train reflected that the man would probably go through a battle looking that way.

"They'll be here shortly to sign your treaty, Cap'n."

"What's that? Who'll be here?"

"Silver Knife. And the bunch of 'em, probably. They'll have a truce flag when they show up."

Train glanced to the narrow window and saw that morning light was splashing full on the big country, now. He had traveled most of the night, walking his horse a good bit of the way, to get back to the fort. The sentry had sent a message to Captain Hollis's quarters immediately upon his return; he'd had strict orders about that, apparently.

"You went out and parleyed, then." Hollis moistened his lips. He drummed with white, tapered fingers on the desk top. "You flouted my orders—"

"Yes, sir. I parleyed," said Train wearily. "Silver Knife'll keep his treaty this time. You can wager on it, Cap'n."

"And what makes you so sure?"

There was an abrupt gunshot outside, and a bawling voice: "*Alaarm! Post number three!*"

Train lifted his eyes to the window again, and Hollis rose quickly from his chair to step to it and look out of it.

The broad line of Navajos came across the plain, seeming to grow from it riding slowly toward the fort. Silver Knife in his bright scarlet tunic was at their head. He carried a lance with a white cloth fluttering from it.

"That means peace, Cap'n," said Train.

He felt tired. His legs felt as though

they couldn't hold him any longer and the rims of his eyes were hot and dry. He wanted to sleep almost more than he wanted to live.

"You see, they trust the white man again. I could've killed Silver Knife—by all the rules I could've killed him. I could've put my Green River deep into him."

"What are you talking about?" said Hollis.

"'Stead, I disarmed him, let him up, called 'em all around me and made a little speech. They like speeches—fancy ones. I told 'em that we were all really brothers, the whole bunch of us, long before I pulled Silver Knife from the rapids and he adopted me. I told 'em the thing for brothers to do was to trust each other—and I could see by their eyes they were ready to give it a whack, right then."

Hollis thrust his head forward and narrowed his eyes. He put his thumbs in his belt.

"Train, do you mean to say that you had some sort of fight—a duel—with that Indian? Are you pulling this story out of the air? You're not even marked, Train. You're not even scratched——"

"No, sir." Train sighed. "For seven years I been teaching cadets things like knife-fighting. That's a lot of practice, Cap'n, in keepin' your skin whole. It kind of surprised old Silver Knife, too——"

Hollis simply stared at him, then.

Train made a formal salute, and since he was tired there wasn't much snap to it. He wanted to get somewhere and rest, now—there wasn't anything more he could say, even if he had the energy to say it. And it suddenly seemed as though things were going to be the way he had wanted. There was a peculiar kind of a swirling in Hollis's eyes; he could almost see the movement of the man's mind behind them.

That look in the captain's eyes was the beginning of understanding.

Answers to "Cow-Country Spanish" Quiz on page 121

1. Chaps (pronounced *shaps*). Seatless leather over-pants or riding-leggings.
2. Cinch. Saddle girth.
3. Stampede. Panicky running of a herd.
4. Lobo or loafer. A wolf.
5. Mustang. A wild horse.
6. Coosie. Cook.
7. Dolly welter or dally. A turn of rope taken around the saddle horn to prevent slipping.
8. Lariat. Looped rope used for catching.
9. Savvy. Know or understand.
10. Wrangler or wrango or horse wrangler. Man who looks after the horse herd on roundup.
11. Taps, also called eagle bills. Pointed leather stirrup covers.
12. Hackamore. A rope halter.
13. Hoosegow. Jail.
14. Lasso. A catch rope, or to catch with a rope.
15. Cavyard or cavy. The remuda or saddle-horse herd.
16. Kin savvy? Who knows? or I don't know.
17. McCarty. A hair or other loose-woven rope used as reins or as a lead or tie rope.
18. Coonie. A cowhide stretched under a wagon bed to carry fuel on the roundup; also called possum belly or bitch. Literally, *cuna* means cradle.
19. McGay. A hardtwist rope made of the fibers of the *maguery* or century plant.
20. Theodore. An extra safety cord, usually of horsehair, running from the nose strap of a halter up over the top of the horse's head.

T. J. and the Eating Indian

By CLARK GRAY

CORNERED, T. J. wagers on his red-skin's gustatory capacity — the stakes his freedom from matrimony's dubious blessings. A ZGWM original.



T. J. McDOWELL was a wicked old man, and proud of it. He claimed he'd drunk more whisky, stomped more broncs, and kissed more percentage girls than any other cowman in the Nations. He also claimed he was a personal friend of the devil, himself.

T. J. was little—about fifteen hands high. He wouldn't weigh a hundred-twenty with his pockets full of rocks. He was ugly as homemade sin, and just about as old.

One evening T. J. asked me if I remembered an Indian named Johnny White Tail.

I remembered him. Johnny White Tail was a toothless old Tonkawa who came around the Crosstrack every once in a while.

T. J. said, "Son, Johnny White Tail got me in a peck of woman trouble once. Worst woman trouble I was ever in." T. J. grinned a self-satisfied grin. "And I been in plenty."

I said, "T. J., are you getting ready to tell another of them windies?"

T. J. looked hurt. This was spring roundup, and we were lying on our blankets after supper. T. J. had done his day's work with the rest of us, and now he was easing himself with a pint whisky bottle. T. J. stoppered the bottle carefully.

"Son, you don't appreciate a man with experience. You could learn something from this story."

I said, "I already know how to lie, T. J. Though I admit I can't do it as good as you."

T. J. scowled. "Son, I never thought a foreman of mine would be so all-fired foolish. If you're too damned dumb to learn from another man's experience, maybe—"

"All right, T. J., all right," I said. "You ain't going to fire me and you know it. But go ahead, I'll listen to this one if I can stand it."

T. J. grinned. "That's better—Well, I was a catch for any woman in them days, son. Just sixty-four years young, and handsome as a he-goat. Rich, too. Leastwise, it seemed rich then. I'd just shipped the last of the calf crop, and I'd got plenty of winter hay, a field of shocked kaffir, and money left. Johnny White Tail was riding for me. Me and him went up to Caldwell, Kansas, to throw a whingding . . ."

Caldwell, Kansas, T. J. went on, was at that time the devil's own huckleberry patch. And Marge Baker's saloon was the juiciest part of the thicket. So naturally that's where T. J. and Johnny White Tail headed. Marge Baker greeted T. J. and Johnny at the batwings.

"T. J., you old mud turtle!" she belowed. "You haven't thrown a whingding here in two weeks."

Marge grabbed T. J. and pecked him on the cheek (T. J. said she pecked about like a horse with the snuffles) and then she slapped Johnny White Tail on the back, almost knocking him down. Marge Baker was not the dainty kind. She had yellow curls. Her figure had the conventional ins and outs, but the outs were considerable bigger than the ins.

Marge said worriedly, "I been crazy frantic about you, T. J. You ain't been sick?"

T. J. grinned and shook his head.

"Me and Johnny White Tail been shipping off the calf crop. But tonight we're going to cut the wolf loose, Marge. Johnny White Tail wants some of your dried-apple pies. And I want—"

"I know what you want, T. J.! I'll open up a fresh barrel of rotgut and send the percentage girls over, you wicked man, you!" Marge giggled and chucked T. J. under the chin, then turned to Johnny. "Johnny White Tail, you want to tell my fortune again while you eat?"

Johnny White Tail shrugged. "Sure. So long you got apple pie, I tell fortune."

T. J. said, "Marge, you're plumb foolish to let Johnny tell your fortune. That's just Injun voodoo. Johnny ain't got the brains to be a real fortune teller."

Johnny White Tail grinned at that. Johnny wore a flea-bitten blanket, tattered cotton shirt and pants, and a moth-eagle feather in his hair.

"Don't need brains," Johnny said cheerfully. "White man need brains. Injun need apple pie."

T. J. grunted and left Marge and Johnny, being anxious to get started with his whingding. It didn't take long. T. J. got him a water glass of fresh rotgut on one knee and a redheaded percentage girl on the other, and pretty soon he had his wolf cut loose. T. J. hollered at the orchestra to play—it was just a couple of fiddles and a piano—and then he began to caper.

There wasn't another man in the Nations, or Kansas, either, that could caper like T. J. He got to stomping so hard with his redhead that he raised a dust from the floorboards of the saloon. After a while T. J. left the redhead at the bar and staggered outside for a breath of air.

He was leaning against the hitchrail, surveying the bright lights of Caldwell with a half-drunken solemnity, when Marge breezed through the batwings. She looked anxiously up and down the street until she saw him. Then a kind of light came in Marge's eye. She smiled. She took T. J. by the arm and pulled him up against her.

"Johnny White Tail just told me everything, T. J. You darling, bashful boy!" she said.

She rumbled T. J.'s hair. Something about it gave T. J. the creeps. He pushed away.

"You been catin' loco, Marge? Hell, I ain't bashful."

Marge giggled. "I didn't think so either, lover-boy. But Johnny told me different."

T. J. stared. A cold premonition trickled down his spine like a melting icicle. "What did that addle-pated Injun tell you, Marge?" he demanded.

"He said—" she turned a delicate pink—"he said there was a certain man. With a certain feeling. But he was too bashful to talk about it—"

T. J. choked. He backed off from Marge, and the melting icicle on his spine seemed to freeze again between his shoulder blades.

Marge went on happily, "Ain't it wonderful how them Injuns can see inside of a person?"

"Yeah." Warily T. J. side-stepped around Marge, keeping his distance. This was trouble; T. J. could recognize it as well as any man. He got the hitchrail between him and her.

"I got to see that Injun. Marge, you go bake some pies or something. We'll talk about this—uh—business, later."

T. J. ducked under the hitchrail. Inside, he found Johnny White Tail in

the back room. A deck of soiled cards lay face up on the table, where Johnny had been telling Marge's fortune. Johnny had a quarter of an apple pie in his thin brown hands, and he was munching contentedly.

T. J. shut the door behind him. Johnny grinned around his pie.

T. J. said, "Johnny, you damned crazy Injun! You got hair in the butter—what in blazes did you tell Marge?"

Johnny White Tail lifted the top crust of his piece of pie, peered at the apples, then lowered the crust and took another bite.

"I do you big favor, T. J.," Johnny said. "I tell her you want to marry her, but you too bashful to ask. Maybe now she give you free whisky, huh?"

"Maybe now she figgers to marry me, huh! Confound you, Johnny! You got me in a helluva pickle. She's mewling like a hungry calf!"

"You no like?" Johnny scowled, puzzled. "You no like woman crazy for you, T. J.? I no savvy this."

"You'd savvy damned quick if she was crazy for you. You got me into this, Johnny—you got to get me out."

Johnny White Tail laid down his pie, and a hurt look came into his eyes. Johnny worshiped T. J. like a dog. He stared thoughtfully at the cards. Finally he said:

"I could tell her you already got wife. And kids. Seven kids."

"Hell, no!" T. J. groaned. "I'd be the laughing-stock of the cow country if a story like that got out. A man's got to think of his reputation, Johnny."

Johnny grunted. He stared hopelessly at the cards. T. J. took a turn around the room, thinking hard, and the harder he thought the worse his predicament became.

For T. J., wicked as he was, had a

soft heart. He couldn't bear the thought of hurting Marge by telling her he didn't really love her. But marriage—T. J. shuddered. Marriage to Marge would be just as permanent as death, and considerably more painful. T. J. was still turning it in his mind when Marge came in with a steaming apple pie for Johnny White Tail. One look at her beaming face told T. J. he'd have to do something, and pronto.

T. J. said, "Marge, look. Johnny was a little previous in what he told you. And he put it a little strong—"

Marge simpered across the pie. T. J. felt himself color up, and he knew this would make her think he *was* bashful. The knowledge made him color worse than ever.

"Don't try to talk about it now, T. J., darling," she said. "Wait till I cut this pie for Johnny, then we'll stroll out in the moonlight behind the saloon." She giggled.

T. J. stifled a groan. He said, "Marge, I ain't—I never have been exactly the marrying kind. A stroll in the moonlight's okay, but—Marge, ain't you and me a little too—uh—too *mature* to get married?"

Marge giggled again. "A ripe peach," she said, "is the sweetest, T. J."

T. J. said desperately, "Johnny White Tail's a good Injun. Why don't you marry him, Marge?"

Johnny White Tail dropped the piece of pie he had halfway to his mouth. "I think my mother is sick," he said. "So long."

Johnny White Tail kicked over his chair and started for the door. T. J. just managed to catch him by the blanket and drag him back, eagle feather flopping. Marge Baker was pounding the table and roaring:

"Set him down, T. J., set him down.

Hell, I wouldn't marry an Injun that eats the way he does."

T. J. spun Johnny around, and Johnny quit struggling. Warily Johnny watched Marge.

"Go ahead and eat, Johnny," Marge said calmly. "I ain't going to marry you. T. J., what's the matter? You getting cold feet?"

There was a dangerous glint in Marge's eye now. Johnny White Tail grunted his relief and reached for another quarter of pie. T. J. squirmed, feeling the color in his face flush up to a dull red.

Marge said scathingly, "Anything I hate, it's a welching man!"

T. J. made a last desperate try. "Look, Marge. You don't savvy. It takes a whole cow camp just to support Johnny White Tail—just to earn enough to feed him. You know how that Injun eats. Well, Johnny's my sidekick. I couldn't get married and leave him. And I doubt if you could feed him, Marge."

It was lame. It couldn't be much lamer, T. J. thought. But he was clutching at straws. He moved up behind Johnny White Tail, where Marge couldn't see, and booted Johnny on his bare shins.

Johnny grunted, looked protestingly at T. J., caught the savage look in T. J.'s eyes, and finally understood.

"Yep," he said. "I eat like hog, Miz Baker. One time I eat four dozen eggs, ten pounds steak, one dozen pies, and six quarts coffee. You no could feed me."

T. J. groaned inwardly. Johnny was laying it on too thick, like the dumb Indian he was. But now T. J. had to string along. He said quickly:

"That's right, Marge. I seen him do it. You couldn't feed him, and you

wouldn't want to separate me from my old buddy, Johnny White Tail. Would you?"

Marge was looking suspiciously from Johnny White Tail back to T. J. Her face had lumped into hard muscles. She looked as if she were either going to cry or start swinging. Either result would have been disastrous for T. J. Finally she spoke, gruffly.

"No man could eat that much. You're pulling my leg."

T. J. glanced at the floor. Marge's ankles were thicker than his own thighs. T. J. shuddered.

"No, I ain't, Marge. Honest. I'd ask Johnny to show you, only he's already ate a pot of son-of-a-gun before we left the Nations. Didn't you, Johnny?"

T. J. booted Johnny again. Johnny White Tail jumped, and nodded vigorously. Johnny White Tail opened his mouth, then closed it, and a startled light seemed to break in the Indian's black eyes. Johnny struck his palm on the table.

"I make bet, Miz Baker," he said. "I eat like I say. Four dozen eggs, ten pounds steak, one dozen pies, six quarts coffee. You fix. If I no can eat by midnight, you marry T. J. If I eat, you let T. J. go back to Crosstrack."

Johnny White Tail beamed proudly, his brown face wreathed in smiles, as if asking T. J. for approval. T. J. couldn't control his groan this time. The Indian was trying to help, but he had fixed it for sure. First place, the idea was crazy; second, Johnny actually *had* eaten that pot of son-of-a-gun.

Marge Baker was squinting hard at Johnny White Tail. "There's something rotten about this. T. J., did you put him up to that?"

T. J. gulped and started to shake his head. Then a faint hope rose in him—

maybe Marge would take this crazy bet, he thought.

That would give T. J. a fighting chance. Johnny White Tail could never in the world eat what he claimed before midnight, but T. J. might be able to think up a trick to win the bet.

T. J. was no fool, remember. He had tricked cleverer people than Marge Baker, although never against such odds. But Marge, T. J. thought, would herself be a fool to take such a bet. Then T. J. realized that Marge was not a fool, either. She had built up a good business here. She wouldn't take on the load of feeding Johnny White Tail if he really ate as much as he said. Besides, she ought to have a sneaking suspicion by this time that T. J. didn't want to marry her. If she suspected that, what better way to force T. J. to marry her than to win this bet?

T. J. glanced at Marge. She had evidently been thinking along much the same lines. She grinned and said, "By golly, you're on, T. J. How about it? Want to gamble for the heart of your lady?" She giggled.

The giggle did it. The giggle, and the fact that T. J. had always been a gambler, especially when he saw a chance to cheat. Then, too, making a bet out of this thing put it on a different plane. If Marge lost, it wouldn't hurt her feelings the way it would if T. J. had to turn her down cold.

T. J. said. "Marge, you're talking cowboy language. Let's start with the eggs. I know just how Johnny likes 'em—"

Marge got the four dozen eggs cooked by ten o'clock. T. J. stood over the kitchen range in the rear of the saloon and watched, making sure that Marge soft-boiled them—plenty soft. That was the way Johnny White Tail liked them.

The four dozen eggs lasted about twenty minutes. They sort of slipped down.

The ten pounds of steak went a little slower; it had to be chewed. Still, it was gone at a quarter of eleven, and Johnny White Tail was still grinning confidently at T. J., with just a faint glaze of stupefaction in his black eyes.

Johnny White Tail had an hour and a quarter to eat twelve apple pies and drink six quarts of coffee.

Marge slipped out of the back room to fetch the pies. She returned presently, carrying a couple of pies and a steaming two-quart coffeepot. T. J. noticed that Marge was grinning, and he blinked, looked again, and suddenly it came to T. J. that her grin was too tickled-looking.

T. J. said suspiciously, "Marge, you ain't trying to cheat me some way?"

Marge looked hurt. "Lover-boy, it ain't that I don't want to cheat. Seeing what a handsome man I stand to win." She giggled. "But I'm an honest woman—you know that."

"Uh-huh." T. J. leaned forward. "What's that on your fingers, Marge?"

She glanced at her fingers. A few grains of white substance stuck to them. She made a move as if to hide her hand behind her, but she couldn't because that hand held the coffeepot. So Marge set down the coffeepot, licked her fingers, grinned crookedly, and said:

"Sugar, T. J. I didn't think the pies were sweet enough. I slipped a little sugar under the crust."

T. J. said sarcastically, "You didn't think the sugar would fill Johnny up, so he couldn't eat so much? Oh no, Marge—you just wanted the pies to be the way he likes them!"

T. J. pounded the table with his fist, making the coffeepot jump two inches

into the air. "Condemn it, Marge!" he roared. "You tricked me! But I ain't giving up yet, damn it!"

Now T. J. was putting on an act. T. J. was no fool, remember. Actually this sugar business fell right in with his plans. But T. J. snarled at Marge and pretended to be put out.

T. J.'s phony anger tickled Marge. She giggled and pushed the pie under Johnny's nose. Johnny broke out a quarter of pie and began to eat, and of course a big smile rippled across Johnny's leathery face.

Because Johnny, being an Indian, liked his pie sweet. But it was only natural that he couldn't eat so much this way. T. J. saw the sugar under the crust, thick and white; he estimated Marge had put about a pint of sugar in each pie. T. J. scowled at her and forced a cup of coffee on Johnny White Tail.

Johnny White Tail always drank his coffee three or four cups at a time, gulping them down as fast as he could gulp. So it wasn't long till that two-quart pot was empty. It took a little longer to finish the two pies. Toward the end an unhappy look slipped into Johnny White Tail's eyes.

T. J. picked up the empty pot and the pie pans and followed Marge back into the kitchen. Marge bent over the oven to remove a brace of pies and T. J. patted her familiarly. While she was giggling about that, T. J. sauntered over to the sink and slyly picked up a bar of soap.

"T. J., lover-boy," Marge simpered, "you do have a queer way of showing your feelings. I seen you do that to that redheaded percentage girl, once. After we're married, T. J., you ain't going to associate with them good-for-nothing women."

T. J. controlled a shudder. He turned his back on Marge, heading for the coffee urn. While his back was turned, he slipped the bar of soap into the two-quart coffeepot, chuckling craftily. Then he held the pot under the spigot of the urn and poured steaming coffee directly atop the bar of soap.

The soap was made by Marge herself—out of lye and hog fat. She always beat it with a ladle before she cooled it out; this process made the soap float. So when T. J. had the coffee poured, he was able to fish out the remnants of the soap while Marge was sprinkling cinnamon on the pies. The cake of soap was nearly half gone, dissolved in the coffee. Grinning wickedly, T. J. replaced it on the sink.

Johnny White Tail looked a little bloated when T. J. and Marge returned with the pies and the soaped coffee. He rubbed his belly thoughtfully.

"T. J., Johnny damn dumb Injun. I think you have to marry Marge."

T. J. laughed cheerfully. "You're a damn dumb Injun for sure, Johnny. But we ain't going to lose." T. J. winked slyly. "Here, have some more coffee."

Johnny drank three cups of coffee. When he set down the cup, he shivered a little, shaking his eagle feather. But that was all. T. J. had expected more reaction, even though he knew Johnny had a stomach that would make cast iron feel ashamed of itself. T. J. was disappointed.

His disappointment shifted to worry when Johnny White Tail commenced bravely to eat the third pie. T. J. kept shoving fresh cups of coffee at Johnny, and Johnny kept drinking them and shuddering a little. By the time Johnny had finished the third pie, T. J. knew he had to do something drastic.

Marge, sitting across the table from

Johnny, giggled. "You're going to lose, lover-boy. Johnny can't eat nine more of them sweet pies to save his soul."

Johnny White Tail, his mouth smeared with pie, glanced blearily at T. J. He hiccupped.

"Miz Baker good woman," Johnny White Tail said profoundly. "I think maybe you marry her, T. J. I think you be very happy."

"No you don't," T. J. said grimly. "You don't get off that easy, Johnny. You made your brag—now you got to eat nine more pies before midnight." Something about Johnny White Tail's sickish look gave T. J. a little hope. "Come here, Johnny. Come lie down on the floor. Over here."

Marge leaned suspiciously across the table on her fat elbow. "What you going to do to him, T. J.?"

"None of your business, Marge. Johnny is my Injun; I'll do anything to him I damn please."

Johnny White Tail had always obeyed T. J. without question. He did so now, with a puzzled look in his eyes. He stretched out on his back before T. J., and T. J. pulled John's eagle feather out of his hair.

"Open your mouth, Johnny," said T. J.

Johnny White Tail said, "Huh! Why for? I ain't want to eat no feather, T. J."

"Open up, damn it," T. J. roared.

Johnny White Tail sighed and opened his mouth. T. J. heard Marge bellow something about this not being fair, and T. J. rammed the feather down Johnny's throat, aware that Marge was coming toward him. Johnny croaked a muffled protest.

T. J. felt Marge's fat hand clasp his shoulder, pulling him back. Marge was setting her feet against the floor, pulling with all her huge weight, but T. J.

hung desperately onto Johnny White Tail and kept shoving the feather till he heard Johnny choke.

Then T. J. swung off and let Johnny up. Johnny White Tail plunged for the door. T. J. heard a couple of shrill shrieks from the main barroom as Johnny plowed through the percentage girls. Then faintly, from outside the batwings, Johnny heard the sound that told him he'd achieved complete success. T. J. turned and grinned at Marge.

Marge's face was lumped with hard muscle again. Something in her eye made T. J. back off quickly, yet at the same time he knew he didn't have to worry about marrying Marge anymore. Not now.

"T. J., you gutter-minded old scalawag," Marge croaked, "you cheated. I got half a mind to tromp you into the floor, except I wouldn't dirty my feet."

T. J. wiped the grin off his face. But it wouldn't stay off. It kept coming back.

"No, Marge," T. J. said, "I didn't cheat any worse than you did. You put extra sugar in the pies. That helped make Johnny sick. I just helped him a little more with soap in the coffee and that feather. Besides, we wagered how much Johnny could eat. We didn't say nothing about emptying him out so he could start over again."

"And," T. J. told me, "of course I won the bet. I went outside and got Johnny White Tail after a while. I rinsed out the coffee pot and quieted his stomach with a half dozen cups of good black java. Pretty soon he began to get hungry. He finished up those other nine pies by eleven-thirty. Him and me went home, and I was still a free man to stomp brons and kiss the percentage girls."

T. J. flipped away his cigar. From my blanket, I could see it bouncing across the campground, showering sparks into the grass. Overhead, a half moon had come up, and by its light I saw T. J. grinning.

I said, "T. J., one thing about you. You ain't rich, and you sure as hell ain't beautiful. But you got enough imagination to found a mule."

T. J. just laughed and eased himself with a snort from his hip bottle.

"Whatever became of Marge Baker?" I said. "Make it good now, T. J. I suppose she married Johnny White Tail?"

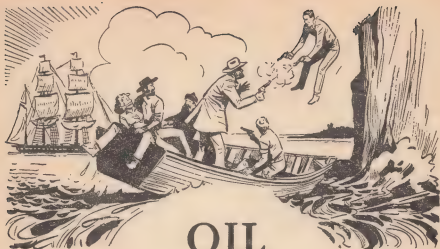
T. J. shook his head. "You plumb near guessed it, son. She was put out at me, of course. Wouldn't never let me come back in the saloon no more. But she sorta fell for Johnny because he liked her cooking so well. Johnny used to go up to Caldwell every Saturday and eat Marge's cooking. Got so fat he couldn't hardly climb on a horse."

"Johnny and Marge," T. J. said, "was fixing to get married, sure enough. Then along came a Chautauqua preacher. One of them skinny kind, all eyes and long hair. Well, that preacher acted like he hadn't ate a square meal since he was seven year old. He could eat rings around Johnny White Tail. You know what happened, son?"

I said, "Marge ran away with the preacher?"

"She did," T. J. said. "Went to Kansas City. Last I heard they had four kids, and the preacher had to hot-foot it to feed that brood. Dang near starved till he got the idea of renting out the kids. He rented them out to carnivals for sideshow fat men."

"It's a fact, son," T. J. said. "The truth, if I ever told it."



OIL

At Mattole River

By JOHN E. KELLY

HORACE BRADLAW, *ex-Union officer and special agent for the Secretary of the Interior*, runs smack into the middle of trouble when his oil-hunting assignment turns up a nest of Confederate sympathizers in California's hotly disputed Mattole Valley. A ZGWM original novelette.

THE wagon trail skirted a copse of feathery young redwood, climbed a low ridge, and lost itself in a natural clearing overlooking the Pacific. Access to a group of ranch buildings in the middle distance was barred by a gate of peeled poles. A tall girl leaned against the barrier, forearms folded on the top rail, and regarded Bradlaw's approach pensively. Bradlaw stared.

The girl wore levis. Insouciant and close-fitting, they made contact with slender half boots and a soft gray shirt obviously in direct touch with the girl herself. Bradlaw blinked; this was a

mirage, compounded of loneliness and the blinding flash of sun-struck ocean behind her lithe, rounded figure. On Beacon Hill where they smiled—even in Vicksburg where so lately they had hissed him—young ladies wore hoop-skirts, petticoats, and pantalettes.

He had never seen a girl in pants. On the stage of the Old Howard, it was whispered, abandoned females pranced in such shameless unmentionables, shunned by all proper Bostonians. But this girl did not look abandoned. She looked—Resolutely Bradlaw lifted his gaze from the artless revelations of her

masculine garb. She was bareheaded, her hair cropped like a man's. Yet very unmannish, that cap of brown curls. He had a word for the girl now: disturbing. Definitely.

Clumsily Bradlaw climbed out of the stock saddle that went with his rented horse. Favoring his right leg, he took a step forward, doffing his new townsman's high-crowned beaver.

"Horace Bradlaw, of Boston," he said formally. Then, registering her impact, he smiled. "Good afternoon! Is this Mr. Moffitt's ranch?"

The girl giggled delightedly. "Bahston!" she mimicked in a warm contralto. "Say it again!" Her merry blue eyes denied affront.

"But it is," he insisted. "Boston, I mean. Like that. Everybody says it."

Even the freckles on her short, straight nose were suddenly demure. "Likely they don't have proper schoolin'," she speculated compassionately. Without change of tone she slid dextrously under his guard. "Did you come to see Poppa about the oil?"

Bradlaw started. Was his mission so obvious? "How could you know?" he barked.

The girl smiled disarmingly. "Everybody does, since that well came in over on Mattole River," she explained. "Poppa has the biggest ranch in Walker District and they say the main oil pool's bound to be right under this ridge. He's promised to buy me a champion Mexican saddle, all silver and doodads, soon's he makes a deal." She pirouetted in joyous expectancy.

"If you sign up with Poppa quick, you can help me pick out the saddle," the girl promised. "Don't you just love full-stamp leather and tapaderas big enough to hide a bear cub in?"

Bradlaw smiled wryly, cocking a

thumb at the gear on his mount. "My knowledge of Western saddles is neither great nor happy, Miss Moffitt," he confessed.

"'Miss Moffitt!'" that young lady sniffed. "It's 'Mary Lou' unless you are—"

"Ma'y Lou!" An intemperate shout, urgent and compelling, rose from the wagon trail.

Bradlaw whirled as hoofs pounded behind him. His patient hack gelding, standing with drooping head and raised pastern, started and flinched from the arrogant rush of a great black stallion.

The rider matched his mount, sinewy, narrow-hipped, molded to the saddle. Under a sweeping brim of gray felt, a scowling countenance inspected Horace. Wide, willful mouth, hot brown eyes showing no whites, lean cheeks flecked with feverish rose, it was a face of reckless youth that counted no cost, least of all to itself.

The rider pulled up in a sliding stop that brought the stallion nearly to its haunches.

"Ma'y Lou," he cried, spearing at Bradlaw with an accusing forefinger, "hev I caught you lallygaggin' with a Rooshian?"

"No such thing!" the girl retorted spiritedly. "Horace comes from Boston." She said it Back Bay style, but the angry youth ripped through the camouflage.

"A damyankee, hey?" The brown eyes bugged out with rage. "Diff'runt breed of cat, but ornery as a Russky." He turned on Bradlaw, his voice dropping to a tight-leashed rasp.

"Mister, folks in this neck o' the woods don't cotton to pizen skunks! If you got the sense God gave little apples, you'll vamoose. I—"

The girl cut in swiftly. "'Lije, Poppa told you to keep off the wagon trail! If you knew why Mr. Bradlaw's here—"

The youth stared from Mary Lou to Horace. Emotion drained from his face, leaving a sallow mask. Bradlaw remembered rows of such faces, spent from struggle with malaria or Yellow Jack, in the field hospital where he had mended his leg.

'Lije came to a sudden decision. Spurring sharply, he put the stallion at the gate. Under the sleek black flanks great muscles coiled and flexed. From a near standing start the horse catapulted itself across the bars.

Bradlaw's nerves crisped and he lunged futilely forward as he saw Mary Lou under the ironshod hoofs. The girl ducked lithely to safety. Hardly had the stallion lit galloping when she lifted the rawhide loop securing the gate and swung the bars aside.

"Come in," Mary Lou said evenly, her face resolutely expressionless. "Poppa will admire to talk oil with you."

Bradlaw ignored her lead. "That young fellow's damnably careless!" he burst out. "The horse might have killed you." His eyes followed the great beast, rounding the ranch house, the butternut jeans of its rider clear against the dark patina of the worn saddle.

"'Lije has his miseries," the girl answered tonelessly, closing the gate. She lead the way to the ranch house, Bradlaw walking beside her with the hack's bridle looped about his arm.

He felt himself rebuked and offered amends for his condemnation. In a neophyte's honest admiration for a master, he exclaimed, "'Lije certainly rides splendidly—like the Rebel horse that cut up our supply trains. Is he your—"

Bradlaw was totally unprepared for the girl's outburst.

"You never saw 'Lije!" Mary Lou stormed, her eyes dark and dilated. "You never even heard tell of him!"

He stared at her while his feet mechanically marked off a half dozen paces. Mary Lou met his eyes defiantly. Confused, he made his peace.

"I may have misunderstood his name," Bradlaw said. "I meant the young man who jumped the gate."

"Nobody jumped no gate!" Mary Lou replied vehemently. "I was alone when you come along and wanted to meet up with Poppa." She made it even plainer. "That's the way it is—if you want to see Poppa."

"As you wish," he agreed stiffly. A green spark of jealousy burned in his breast for the mysterious 'Lije who commanded Mary Lou's fierce loyalty. They walked the rest of the way in silence, with averted eyes.

The ranch house presented a homely, irregular facade. Additions of plank, stone, and white-washed adobe extended the original cabin of squared redwood logs, still the heart of the home place. Above its ironbound door a narrow roofing of cedar shakes shaded a place of dull red tile, set flush with the sundried earth. In this, his favorite lounging-place, with saddle gear hanging from pegs in the wall, Seth Moffitt awaited their coming.

"Poppa," said Mary Lou, constraint still marking her voice, "meet up with Horace Bradlaw of Boston." Beacon Hill would have blackballed her accent.

"Sure pleased," acknowledged Moffitt.

He put forth a lean, hard hand, while his appraising eyes lifted searchingly toward the tall dark visitor. They were

Mary Lou's eyes, sunfaded, ringed by crowsfeet of shrewd good humor, set in a weatherbeaten face whose shaven jaws narrowed to a trim chin beard. Bradlaw liked him at once. This sane, solid citizen would have no part in nonsense about Russians and a headstrong horseman who wasn't there.

Bradlaw drew a breath of comprehension; he must unwittingly have played the part of bystander in a lovers' quarrel between Mary Lou and young 'Lije. Moffitt's voice broke in on his comforting rationalizing.

"A stranger's a friend under my roof," the rancher said, "but there's some we never could be friends with. Before askin' you in to sit, I have to know, are you from the Russian company?"

Bradlaw's head whirled. "No!" he replied acidly. "Before today, I never heard of it."

"Stay in Mattole Valley," Moffitt spoke thin-lipped, "and you'll not hear much else. We're riled to the shootin' stage." He put a friendly hand on the Bostonian's shoulder, urging him toward the door. "Step in and wash down the dust."

"Where do I tie my horse?" asked Bradlaw, seeking a hitching-post.

Moffitt glanced knowingly at the hack. "Rent that from Ed Dutcher in Petrolia?"

Bradlaw nodded. "This morning when I arrived."

"Drop the reins on the ground," the rancher directed. "Hosses hereabout stand without hitchin'."

Massive chairs—peeled and polished oak saplings with plaited rawhide seats and backs—faced a great field-stone hearth.

"Fetch the blue jug, Lou," her father said. Moffitt pulled the cornstalk

stopper and listened appreciatively as the contents swirled at his practiced shaking.

"Come from nigh as far East as you, Bradlaw," Moffitt commented, filling stem-glass beakers brimful. "Kaintucky Bourbon, aged rollin' 'round the Horn."

Raising his glass in silent toast to Mary Lou, Bradlaw made a strangling attempt to follow his host in downing the dollop at a single swallow. While he wiped his streaming eyes the girl took a small copper pail from the mantle.

"Here's what you come so far to see," she said, throwing over her shoulder at her father. "Mr. Bradlaw's fixin' to buy oil land."

The pail was half filled with a thick dark liquid, shot through with greenish tints when held to the light. Horace sniffed, rubbed a smear on his hand, tasted gingerly.

"Well?" demanded Mary Lou.

Bradlaw's reply set her dancing about the room.

"It's rock oil, right enough," he pronounced. "Is there much of it?"

"Four wells hit oil along the River," Moffitt told him. "A dozen more's drillin'—or were until them Russian claim jumpers moved in."

"What right have they in American territory?" demanded Bradlaw.

"There's some Americans—leastwise No'therners—in their company," the rancher replied. "When the Russians had their settlement down to Fort Ross, these fellers claim the Russky boss man—the Czar—gave them title to the whole coast, clear up to Cape Mendocino."

He paused to pass the jug and grinned at Bradlaw's hasty refusal.

"That claim smells fishy to a lot of

folks," Moffitt continued. "When we were openin' this country, takin' up land, fightin' Injuns, buildin' trails and houses, the Russian Company played possum. But now that Walker District runs four—five thousand head of cattle and Jack Davis found oil diggin' a drinkin'-water well, the Russkys yell for the United States Marshal to throw us outa our homes."

Bradlaw's ready sympathy was aroused. "It's a rotten shame!" he exclaimed hotly. "But surely the government will protect your rights."

"Sacramento and Washington won't lift a finger to help us," replied the rancher flatly. "Abe Lincoln didn't carry this county. What's more, most of us Mattole River folks voted for Breckenridge."

"That makes no difference," Bradlaw said positively. "The government will protect every American."

"Don't let it fret you none, young feller," Moffitt said. "We can protect ourselves 'gainst Russians as we did 'gainst Injuns." He pointed to a long-barreled musket hanging over the mantle. "I'm tellin' you about the Russkys to show we can't rightly now sell oil land, like Mary Lou let on."

"I didn't come to buy land," Bradlaw answered. He saw the girl's face fall and continued swiftly. "The Secretary of the Interior sent me here to investigate reports of an oil find. I'm very glad he did, for I'm sure my reports will cause an investigation and no settler will be defrauded of his land."

"We wouldn't know how to thank you!" glowed Mary Lou.

He smiled at her. "It'll be sufficient reward that you and your father won't think, like 'Lije this afternoon, that Yankees are as bad as Russians."

An electric tension crackled in the

room. Bradlaw saw Mary Lou's eyes, enormous with fright and anger; Moffitt was on his feet.

"My son, sir," the rancher said in a lethal drawl, "is in Texas with Kirby Smith, whippin' hell outa the Yankee armies. If you're a federal detective, comin' to indict us for votin' Southern, you got your evidence. You've been a guest in my house—go in peace. But if I catch you on my land again, I'll treat you like a rogue Injun."

On the twilight wagon trail, Bradlaw gave the gelding its head, confident that hunger would lead it to Ed Dutcher's stable. He rode bemused, happiness mingling with chagrin. He had botched his mission, but Mary Lou was heartfree! Mary Lou in levis. Mary Lou—All too soon the huddled lights of Petrolia arose before him.

Bradlaw was heavily asleep in the lean-to tent back of Dutcher's store when his landlord entered, trailing tendrils of fog. The canvas shelter was clammy in the predawn grayness. The storekeeper shook him vigorously.

"Was you wantin' to send out letters, express rider's leavin' for Eureka in an hour," he announced.

Not waiting to dress, Bradlaw swathed himself in a poncho and took ink and paper from his despatch case. Before the appointed time, voices approached, hands fumbled at the tent flaps.

"If that's the express," called Horace over his shoulder, "ask him to wait. I've nearly finished."

"No need to hurry," a deep voice replied. "Any time you like, our company's courier will take your mail."

Bradlaw swung about, confronting a barrel-chested reddish man in his late thirties, with strong features shadowed by a closely clipped beard.

The newcomer put out a beefy hand. "Bradlaw?" he asked. Giving Horace no chance to reply, he rushed on, speaking a confident, faintly accented English. "I'm Modorgoff, agent of the Russian Company. Meant to meet you yesterday but my horse went lame on Squaw Creek and none of these ignorant squatters would show me the common courtesy of a remount. I had to walk and didn't get here until after dark." Anger rumbled in him.

Bradlaw looked his surprise. "How did you know I was coming?" he inquired.

"Our agent in Washington wrote me," Modorgoff replied. "Matter of fact, you were sent at our suggestion."

"That's news to me," Bradlaw said crisply. He veered away from the subject. "Now that I'm here, how real is this oil find?"

"Very real," replied the Russian. "Very good." He scowled. "Too good to leave to a bunch of Southern rebels."

"Who happen to own the land," Bradlaw finished for him.

"You come very poorly prepared!" Modorgoff shot back. "Instructions were given that a thoroughly realistic man be selected." He took a packet of parchment from within his coat. "You do not of course read Russian. French?"

Bradlaw shook his head. "Only a few words."

The Russian unfolded a long sheet. "Here is an English translation of the company's grant from the Czar. It gives us the entire coast."

Bradlaw scanned and returned it. "If you have a claim," he counseled, "ask the courts to enforce it."

"Phutti!" cried Modorgoff in exasperation. "American courts are so naive, they make no distinction between liti-

gants. The squatters are enemies of your government; they voted against you; the son of Moffitt and others fight in the rebel armies. Russian courts send such people to Siberia, and quickly, I can tell you! But here the judge hears both sides alike."

"Of course," agreed Bradlaw. "That's the American way. Perhaps you fear that the judge will find men who cleared the wilderness for homes have better claims to it than a Johnny-come-lately company with a grant from a foreign government that never colonized the coast."

The Russian glared, a tic beating in his eyelid. "Is it possible that you, too, are a rebel?" he grated.

Bradlaw gave him a thin grin. "The Rebs didn't act so at Vicksburg," he said dryly. "They put a couple of slugs into me and knocked me out of the Union Army." His face turned hard and cold. "I'm not interested in your intrigues, Modorgoff. My instructions are to determine the worth of this oil find. That I shall do, and nothing more."

Modorgoff got a grip on himself. "Agreed," he said curtly. "Thus we shall by-pass your courts. For your report will show the importance of the oil pool and our friends in Congress will pass a law validating our claim. In Washington are practical men who do not forget that the Czar's fleet is lying in San Francisco."

Bradlaw rocketed to his feet, fists swinging. "Is that a threat to seize the Mattole Valley?" he demanded hotly. "If your ships appear off-shore, every American, Blue and Gray, will join against them!"

"My dear fellow, I meant nothing of the kind!" protested Modorgoff. "You must have been too busy fighting to

hear that Russian fleets in your waters kept Europe from aiding the rebels. Such service is discreetly compensated." He arose. "I will return in an hour with horses and we shall inspect the oil wells."

"Certainly not," retorted Bradlaw. "The wells aren't yours. To be seen in your company might give the impression that the government is backing your claim." He paused, narrowing his eyes. "A very clever scheme, indeed. Good day, Mr. Modorgoff!"

The tent flap still shook from the Russian's furious exit, as Bradlaw turned to his letter, adding a line.

My reputation as a neutral is established, he wrote. *In less than twenty-four hours I have drawn the anger of both parties.*

Scarce-born Petrolia straggled on the bank of the deep and muddy Mattole River, innocent of ordered streets. Bradlaw picked his way between jerry-built log cabins and plank shanties, heading for the upriver trail. From the dense shade of a spreading live oak on the edge of town, a group of horsemen moved to intercept him. Modorgoff rode up to Horace.

"We're bound up-country, too," he explained with forced heartiness. "I thought we'd ride together."

"Persistent, aren't you?" snapped Bradlaw, pulling his mount aside. "I told you I'm going alone."

"It's very important to the company that your report be complete," insisted Modorgoff doggedly. "We'll make sure that you find all the wells."

"Do you need an army for that?" asked Horace, staring pointedly at the heavily armed quartet drawn up behind the Russian.

"These are company surveyors," Modor-

goff replied, frowning as though to beat down doubt, "making plans for improvements after we take over the oil field." He read Bradlaw's skeptical expression and passed to the offense. "Your impartiality is a pretense! No doubt you're on your way to meet Moffitt, whom you saw yesterday."

Bradlaw was more amused than angry. "Moffitt loves me even less than you do," he replied lightly.

"That I don't believe!" barked Modorgoff. "The company won't tolerate your conniving with the squatters, Moffitt especially. That fellow is the ring-leader; with him out of the way we could easily cow the others. I've been more than fair, offered him half the cost of his improvements—and he ordered me off the land he claims!" The Russian was working himself up to a rage. "The insolence of that fellow! There is nothing I would not do to break him, *nothing!*"

"Your quarrels are no concern of mine," said Bradlaw coldly. "I have a job to do and intend to do it without your assistance or interference. For the last time, good day, Mr. Modorgoff!"

The Russian paled. He put out a massive arm and seized Bradlaw's bridle rein. "You think you are a god, Bradlaw?" he cried in a brittle tone, under which the other thought to detect desperation. "You are above our quarrels? What do you think will happen to the company if your underhanded help to these squatters costs us our lands? What do you think the Czar would do to me? You are a gentleman, yes, you fight only in the law and with a gun, face to face. I spit on such gentleness! I will keep these lands by any means, shooting in the back, a knife in the dark, poison—"

Modorgoff's neck swelled like tur-

key cock's wattles. Choking with fury, he dropped the rein to hold his hand before Bradlaw's face, closing his fingers like rending claws. "Gentleman," he snarled, "you shall see how Modorgoff fights!"

Bradlaw felt his own temper slipping. In a moment he would tangle with Modorgoff and give the Russian cause for complaint to Washington. Spurring his mount, Bradlaw nearly unseated himself as the hack exploded into a gallop. When from a high point in the trail he looked back, the Russians were a quarter mile behind, obviously following him.

The first well lay in a cove by the river, on a triangular lot roughly cleared of scrub and poison oak. A score of men bustled about a shed without walls where pack mules were tethered. A small steam engine clattered, lifting a thin white plume.

As Bradlaw rode down a spur trail into the clearing a man came forward, hand in readiness on his belted gun, peering hostilely at the stranger.

"If you're from the Russian Company, Mister," he said truculently, "you're on the wrong trail and fixin' to get you a case of lead poisonin'."

"Federal inspector," Horace replied, taking credentials from his billfold. On a whim he held them out upside down. The oil man inspected them owlishly.

"He's all right, boys," he called to his companions. "Gov'mint man."

"Which gov'mint," cried a voice amid laughter, "Abe's or Jeff Davis's?"

The guard shed his truculence. "Proud to have you," he assured Bradlaw. "You're seein' the first shipment of rock oil west of Pennsylvan-ia-y. Better stuff, too! This whole coast's floatin' on oil. We're millionaires!"

Horace dismounted and took mental

inventory of the scene. The completed well showed only a short length of six-inch pipe above ground. At the water's edge the steam engine pounded an iron-shod bit through mud and rock for a second bore. Men bailed a green emulsion from the well's open mouth, pouring it into large flat pans set in the shed over smoldering fires, to drive off the water. A cooper fashioned kegs from white-oak staves, others barreled crude oil and lashed filled casks to the pack saddles.

"Genuwine rock oil, good fer man, beast, and lamp." A proud pioneer slapped the plump waist of a keg. "Hundred and twenny gallons goin' to Eureka today, to catch the 'Frisco steamer. We're gettin' six bits a gallon! You tell Washington, Mister, if they hand our wells over to the Russians, they better send the hull Union Army and the Czar, too, to perfect 'em. We ain't givin' up no sech bonanza."

At the last well in the late afternoon, Bradlaw snapped his notebook shut and asked directions of the driller.

"Back the way you come is longer, but safer fer a stranger," the wildcatter replied. "Howsomever, the short cut thar," he pointed to a faint track leading uphill through the brush, "runs to Moffitt's ranch, whar they'll show you the wheel trail to Petrolia."

Horace turned the hack downriver, retracing his tracks. He wanted no more truck with Moffitt than with Russians, he told himself vehemently. Let them settle their own feuds, Mary Lou's lithe image arose before him, but he shrugged it aside, a might-have-been. There was no chance to see her again; he was to start for Washington in the morning.

Up the trail toward him a rider came rapidly, pushing a wiry roan mare. A

boy, thought Bradlaw absentmindedly, mentally writing his report. The rider's curves and curls crossed the setting sun; Horace jerked upright, beaming. Then he saw the girl's set expression and remembered Seth Moffitt's threat. He was unwelcome met. Stiffened with self-conscious pride, Bradlaw pulled the hack aside and stared resolutely past the oncomer.

Mary Lou swung her mare sharply left, blocking the trail. "Horace," she began reproachfully, neatly forcing him on the defensive, "you promised not to tell Poppa about seein' 'Lije."

Her strategy was wasted. Bradlaw heard only his name. Mary Lou was not mad, mad enough to cut him anyway! His heart did nip-ups. While he fumbled for words, staring hungrily at her blue-eyed, freckled face, strangely drawn and pale beneath its Californian tan, Mary Lou rushed on.

"Poppa'd kill me sure if he knew I chased after you—" Bradlaw's blood pressure soared—"but I had to know, I had to!" A small bronzed fist beat on the mare's saddle horn. "Folks 'low you're a Yankee officer. Tell me true, are you here huntin' 'Lije?" Mary Lou's eyes, huge and haunted, held his compellingly.

"No," he told her gently. "I got out of the Army through the hospital. Now I'm a civilian, hunting only rock oil. You don't need to worry about me. I'm leaving tomorrow." Wishfully, he marked added pallor on her cheeks.

"Mary Lou," Bradlaw added, using her name for the first time, "if your brother is a Confederate soldier, he must get back to his lines before the marshal catches him. If he's found here, he'll be shot as a spy."

The girl's eyes sparkled with unshed tears. "Easy to say!" she retorted. "'Lije

was with Kirby Smith, like Poppa said, a lieutenant. Our—Southern boys are the best fighters in the world, but there's a passel of Yankees for every single one of 'em. 'Lije come home on sick leave, figurin' he'd recruit so'jers to help out, 'cause nigh every family in Mattole Valley hails from Dixie."

Mary Lou fought for self-control. "We didn't hardly know 'Lije when he come home, puny and coughin', his hands burnin'-hot! Poppa sent for Doc Archer and he wouldn't let 'Lije go back. Gallopin' consumption—his pillow all blood mornin's. So we're hidin' 'Lije until—"

She made a hopeless gesture. "Mostly he stays in bed, but when he takes a notion, like yesterday, he slips out and saddles the stallion. Poppa and I are plumb terrified somebody'll see him. That's why we lied to you. Lyin' comes hard to Poppa, but we'd do anythin', *anythin'*, to keep them from arrestin' 'Lije!" Her slender shoulders shook with dry sobs.

Stirred and hating himself that he could not lift her burden, Bradlaw rode close to Mary Lou and took her hands. She did not resist; his heart leaped as her fingers curled confidingly within his.

"Let's not borrow trouble," he said with an outward confidence he was far from feeling. "'Lije hasn't been scen yet. The nearest marshal's at Eureka, he won't come nosing down here unless somebody sends for him. Mattole people are your friends, they'd be sure to warn you if the marshal showed himself in the district."

As tension lessened in the girl's face, Bradlaw hurried on. "Besides, the war'll soon be over and the government's bound to declare an amnesty."

Mary Lou seemed comforted. "You make it sound so good," she murmured, slowly withdrawing her hands. "I do take on, but I've been motherin' 'Lije since Ma died when we kids weren't hardly fryin' size."

The girl took sudden note of the hour. The sun was gone, color leached from the afterglow. The river was a dull slash of cold silver and night welled up out of the brush.

"I've got to dust along," Mary Lou said, "or Poppa'll be out huntin' me."

"I'll see you home," replied Bradlaw, desolate at the thought of leaving-taking.

"Oh, no!" cried Mary Lou. "You heard what Poppa said. 'Sides, it's a near piece by the cut-off trail over the ridge." She paused. "Promise you'll never tell I saw you."

"Of course!" Bradlaw agreed fervently. "But," he protested, "I don't like you out here alone at night. You haven't even a gun." He sought to press his upon her.

The girl scoffed. "I know every deer trail and gopher hole in the valley," she said, refusing the Colt. "I'm a lot safer'n you."

Horace sat mute, panicked by their imminent separation. Loneliness swirled within him. The might-have-been of an hour past was become a superlative must.

Mary Lou put her mare slowly in motion. "Horace," she said, close beside him in the dusk, "you said the war'd be over soon. You figurin' to stay in the gov'mint?"

"No," replied Bradshaw, grateful for the change of subject. "I'm going to hunt a place to start my own business."

The girl's voice was low and warm. "There's worse huntin' than in Mattole Valley," she said, and fled.

Speechless with incredulous joy, he could only stare after her. One instant Mary Lou's gray-shirted back was straight in the saddle, in the next his straining eyes found neither curls nor curves among the shadows. He sat motionless until long after the mare's pace had faded to ghostly echoes in his eardrums.

The full dark was thinned by starlight that distorted distance and dimension. The night's chill struck through Bradlaw's clothing. It was time to go; in an hour the trail would be fogbound. A loon moaned near the river. From Moffitt ridge a scream floated down, thin and eerie with distance. Bradlaw started convulsively, then resolutely fought his moment of panic. Even a tenderfoot knew a hunting cougar screamed like a woman. Mary Lou must be home already. Again he gave the hack its head.

Bradlaw rode, worrying the problem of 'Lije. The youth could not remain hidden indefinitely. On the day that Modorgoff learned of the Confederate's return, his company would win the oilfield. Denounced by the Russian, the Mattole ranchers would be jailed, perhaps hanged, as traitors sheltering a spy. Even Mary Lou might not escape the ruthless dragnet. He was gloomily sure of Modorgoff's influence, knew who would bid in the condemned men's forfeited lands. Even 'Lije's death would not lessen their peril. But—and a wave of harsh exultation swept Bradlaw at the thought—only Modorgoff stood between the valley and peace.

Modorgoff had denied Bradlaw's impartiality. He was wrong, but he was about to be right. Horace's report would go to Washington in the morning—by mail, accompanied by his resignation. A damyankee ex-soldier was

re-enlisting—under the gray banner of Mary Lou.

Bradlaw unsaddled and turned the hack into Dutcher's corral. Candle in hand, he was foraging in the storehouse seeking a bait of grain for the gelding when Dutcher saw the flickering gleam and entered.

"Oh, it's you, Cap'n," he said, mollified. "I figured to catch one of them two-legged pack rats that rustles my stuff nigh every night." The storekeeper came closer, dropping his voice to a half whisper.

"Seth Moffitt's girl, Ma'y Lou, was here this after'. 'Peared powerful upset and 'lowed she had to see you. When I let on you'd gone to the wells she burned the breeze gettin' up river. Did she meet up with you?"

"Ye—" began Horace. Tardily he remembered his promise and clamped his jaws on his tattletale tongue. "No, I didn't see Miss Moffitt," he finished lamely.

Dutcher shot him a sharp glance and left the shed without reply.

Bradlaw spent three greenbacks for eggs and potatoes fried in rancid grease, cold hoecakes, and muddy, tepid coffee, wolfing the dreary food untasted in his haste to reach his tent. Hours later, under the last light in Petrolia, he was yawning over the final page of his report when the canvas flaps whipped apart. Horace turned in impatient curiosity to find Seth Moffitt striding toward him, with Dutcher at his heels.

The rancher's voice shook with rage, but his hogleg six-gun held with deadly fixity on Bradlaw's midriff.

"Whar's Ma'y Lou?" Moffitt demanded.

Bradlaw gaped. His mouth worked but no words came. "Is—isn't she home?" he croaked at last.

Moffitt leapfrogged the obvious retort for a question of his own. "Did you see her today?"

Bradlaw's mind parapeted itself behind his rash promise. "No!" he said, firmly and hollowly.

"I think you're lyin'!" Moffitt snapped. By frontier code Bradlaw's answer must be hot lead. Moffitt plainly expected and welcomed it. He would kill the man responsible for his daughter's disappearance, and he ached to dispense with preliminaries.

But Bradlaw made no move toward the belted gun lying on his bedding roll. Two memories that had nagged his subconscious all evening joined and fused under the shock of Moffitt's news. Electrified, unheeding the rancher's hair-trigger readiness, he rose to his feet, brushing against Moffitt's weapon.

"The Russians!" Bradlaw cried, filled with self-loathing—He had sat idly by while Mary Lou was ambushed in the dark! "That scream was no cougar!"

"Russians?" echoed Moffitt and Dutcher in concert.

"Modorgoff and four of his bully boys followed me all day," Bradlaw explained. He sat down again, sick with fear for Mary Lou.

Moffitt gave him no rest. "Whar was this screamin' at?" he prodded.

"On the short-cut trail from the wells to your ranch, just after dark," Bradlaw answered.

Moffitt looked suddenly gaunt and old. "Then you *were* thar," he said heavily. "You lied to me and Ed here 'bout meetin' up with Ma'y Lou. I'll cut the gizzard out'n the bastard that hurt my gal-child! I think it was you; you

claim it was the Russkys. If I had my druthers betwixt a plain liar and a passel of claim jumpers, I'd pick you, Mister. But I ain't lettin' you outa my sight ontill I'm mighty sure. Me and Ed's goin to palaver with Modorgoff, and we're takin' you along."

"Taking me?" shouted Bradlaw. "Just try to keep me from getting my hands on him!"

The rancher registered amazement. "What's between Ma'y Lou and you?" he asked.

"Time to talk about that when we find her," snapped Bradlaw, his words telescoping one another in their haste. "Modorgoff would stop at nothing! While we're talking here—" He broke off and turned to Dutcher. "Where does Modorgoff live?"

"Cabin at the mouth of Mattole, when his ship ain't in," the storekeeper told him.

Bradlaw snatched his gun and was out of the tent before the others could move. From the corral his voice floated back.

"I'm taking a fresh horse, Dutcher," he called.

Somewhat dazedly Moffitt holstered his unfired weapon. "That feller talks faster'n a law wrangler," he complained. "You figure he's fixin' to outfox us, Ed?"

Dutcher pursed his lips judicially. "My uncle knowed a Yankee onct that was a square shooter," he asserted.

The storekeeper moved to the door. "Tenderfoot's right 'bout one thing," he said. "Time's a-wastin'. I'm saddlin' the pinto."

The three rode a narrow trail across broken country to the mouth of the river, holding a fast pace in the rays of the late moon, slowed to a fumbling walk by belts of drifting fog. Dutcher

dismounted to lead his piebald mount through the cotton-thick mist of North Fork ford.

"I'd give a pretty for 'Lije's stallion right now," he declared. "That black devil sees better'n a cat in the dark."

"'Lije!" Moffitt groaned. "I plumb forgot 'Lije. If he wakes and finds the house empty, he'll set out huntin' me and Ma'y Lou, sure as shootin'!"

"Set your mind easy, Seth," Ed counseled. "Nobody's up to see him in Petrolia and it ain't likely he'd come way down here."

The anxious parent refused comfort. "'Lije faults the Russians for his bein' cooped up," Moffitt said. "He hates Modorgoff until I'm afeared to say his name in the house, less'n 'Lije'll be took with the blood coughs."

The trail dipped into a basin carpeted by a saddle-high thicket of beach plums. A low ridge ahead bulked black against the pallid sky.

"We're nearin'," Dutcher called to Horace. "The river mouth and them Russky cabins is jest over the hill." In the windless night, his voice echoed from the ridge.

A spark winked on the height. Lead slashed the thicket before the boom of the musket reached them. Moffitt, leading, halted and swung toward his companions.

"They got Ma'y Lou," he said, "or they wouldn't be guardin' their back trail." There was almost relief in his voice; at least his daughter was not lying dead in the brush.

Leaving their mounts on the slope, the three crept over the crest guns in hand, beating the knee-high brush for ambushed sentries. The ridge top was empty; apparently the lookout had fled to carry the alarm to his fellows. The river mouth and the cabin on its shores

were sunk in a bottomless pool of sooty black.

"We gotta wait for light to close in on 'em," Moffitt whispered, "but leastways they can't high-tail it, neither."

"It'll be a mighty near thing," returned Dutcher, pointing westward. "Look yonder!"

On the black curve of watery horizon, twin pinpoints of light, white above, green below, dipped and rolled with the Pacific combers.

"Modorgoff's ship," breathed the storekeeper, "beatin' in to cross the bar on the mornin' tide."

Night stretched an agonized eternity for Horace before the false dawn filtered into the depths below the crestline button bush wherein he crouched. At the foot of the break-neck, boulder-strewn slope, a short ribbon of stony beach trailed its salvage in the brown flood of the Mattole. Close downstream, low cliffs hemmed in the river nearly to the tossed, white dunes of the seashore. Beyond the thrashing foam of the bar, a black bark with stays'ls set awaited her hour to run in.

Far below, yet so near Bradlaw might toss a pebble among them, riding stock huddled in a small corral. Space was at a premium on the river bank. The pen abutted on a large plank cabin, the latter elbowed a warehouse. Between shack and shed a short pier extended into the current. A moored surfboat rode the still backwater. No human figure was visible.

"They're a-settin' inside, eyes peeled, waitin' fer us to show up on the skyline," Moffitt said. "C'mon, it's light enough now. Don't waste lead until we smoke the devils out."

The three slithered down the slope abreast, widely spaced, taking cover behind rocks and shrubs. Black pow-

der smoked from loopholes in the cabin's walls, slugs ricocheted from boulders, whipped through clumps of manzanita and scrub pine. The silent advance clawing at their nerves, the defenders increased their fire, pumping out lead, pinning their enemies down, halting their progress. In mid-volley the fusillade ceased; a provocative shot from Bradlaw smashed through a boarded window without drawing reply.

Horace fixed his eyes on the cabin's rear door, leading to the corral, ready to block an attempt at a getaway. Finger tightening on the trigger, he had convinced himself that the panel moved ajar, when Moffitt's cry broke on his ears.

"The mavericks are stampedin'!" the rancher cried, leveling his heavy Sharps rifle, "but first I aim to cut my brand on 'em!"

A crouching knot of men scurried from the lee of the cabin to the pier and tumbled into the surfboat.

"Don't shoot, Moffitt," Bradlaw shouted. "They're carrying Mary Lou!"

Blinded with rage, Bradlaw plunged forward, dragged a foot on his rock shelter, and fell heavily down the slope, plowing gravel with his face. When, bruised and shaken, he reached the waterside, Moffitt and Dutcher were before him, peering from the corner of the cabin at the triumphant kidnapers.

"We don't dast shoot for fear of hittin' Ma'y Lou," Moffitt told Horace in a hopeless tone. "Look for yourself."

The surfboat floated a hundred yards downstream, held steady against the current as her rowers backed their oars. A Russian sat in the stern sheets, facing astern, his feet dangling over the side. In his arms he held Mary Lou,

bound and gagged. Amidships, Modorgoff made a megaphone of his cupped hands.

"Moffitt," he called. "Moffitt, come out! We won't fire on you for five minutes, and you sentimental Americans won't fire on a woman."

The three filed out on the pier, shame-faced, raging at their impotency, their useless guns holstered. Modorgoff roared at the sight of Horace.

"Well, well, Bradlaw, so you're a rebel after all! You thought to hinder me, now I crush you like a centipede. My Washington agent will get a treason warrant and I'll be there to see you hang!"

"Send back Ma'y Lou, you damned polecat," shouted Moffitt, "or thar ain't nothing I won't do to you!"

"I'll send her back, if you do what I want," retorted the Russian. "I'm taking your daughter out to my ship. Bring me deeds to all the valley ranches before sundown and you have my word the girl will be unharmed. Frankly, she's a pretty thing and I hope you fail. Then I'll have both the girl and the oilfield, for my ship comes from Alaska with fighting men to clear you squatters off the company's land."

Modorgoff barked an order. The rowers dug in their oars and the surfboat dropped rapidly downstream, keeping close under the cliff where the current ran strong.

Beserk, Moffitt gibbered and lunged for the river, to pursue Modorgoff. Horace and Dutcher caught him on the edge of the planking, but their combined strength could no more than hold the frantic father, who turned his rage on them.

"If we let loose, Seth'll kill us now, fer sure," panted Dutcher.

"We've got to get him off the pier,

where he can't see the boat," replied Bradlaw, "but damned if I know how we'll ever get him up the ridge."

Following his thought, his despairing glance swept the height. This was the final blow, the last straw. Modorgoff held all the cards. A rapid movement caught Bradlaw's lackluster eye, startling him into strained attention. A horseman flashed into sight, racing toward the cliff, a youth astride a great black stallion.

To Dutcher's consternation, Bradlaw loosed his grip on Moffitt. He pounded the rancher's back.

"Seth, Ed!" he shouted, gesturing wildly. "It's 'Lije!"

This new shock brought Moffitt out of his frenzy. "So 'tis," he said almost matter-of-factly. "Likely the boy found our hosses and knew we was lockin' horns with Modorgoff. Then he saw the boat and went for a look-see."

"He can't do nothin'," mourned Dutcher.

'Lije slid to a stop on the brink of the cliff overlooking the surfboat. The Russians saw him. Their hoarse shouts echoed from the stone face. They fired wildly overhead.

The youth drew two long forty-fives.

"'Lije!" bellowed Bradlaw, cringing for Mary Lou's peril, "Don't shoot! Your sister's in the boat!" Even as his shout echoed, he knew its futility.

'Lije put a foot in the saddle and stood erect, balancing expertly, facing the river. A high, piercing cry sheathed Bradlaw's cheeks and arms with gooseflesh. At Shiloh and at Vicksburg he had heard that cry, from haggard men in butternut gray charging massed Union batteries.

The rebel yell on his lips, guns gripped at arm's length, 'Lije dove. Tempered as a Toledo blade, his body

arched over the brink, then straightened, plummeting directly upon the surfboat.

Panic seized the Russians. Swinging toward midstream in flight, the starboard rower caught a crab. His oar flew from his hand beyond reach. The boat lost way, and spun idly in a tide rip.

The Russians blasted away as fast as they could load. The human arrow hurtling upon them held his fire. Not until 'Lije was twenty feet overhead did he squeeze his triggers. The twin explosions were lost in the crash as his body hit the prow of the surfboat.

Horace saw the stern of the surfboat rise as the tremendous force of the blow shattered the stem, throwing Mary Lou and her captor forward into the bottom of the craft. Bradlaw did not see the fountain of foam mushrooming swiftly overhead, nor hear the resounding splash. He was under water, adding to the impetus of his dive with flailing arms and churning feet.

When he surfaced thirty feet beyond the pier, he broke into a powerful two-arm racing stroke that lifted his head and shoulders above the small choppy rollers. Instinctively he kept within the narrowing lane of river current, gaining speed.

The waterlogged surfboat had drifted across the slack water and was coming toward him on the flood side. Three Russians splashed frantically to safety on the farther shore. Of 'Lije there was no trace. As Bradlaw, breathing a prayer, turned out of the current to intercept the boat, immediately before him a tidal swirl disgorged a body.

Bradlaw swerved violently aside, thinking Modorgoff alive. Then he saw the gaping hole in the scalp, the shattered jaw where 'Lije's lead had emerg-

ed. Horace had no chivalry toward kidnapers.

"Go to hell!" he muttered, placing a hand on the dead man's shoulder and thrusting sharply downward. With savage joy he saw the eddy reclaim its prize.

Mary Lou was alone in the wrecked boat. Her body was awash. Only her shoulders, pillowed on Modorgoff's sodden despatch case, and her head, jammed against a thwart, were above water. Her eyes were closed. The gray shirt, molded to her young contours, showed no lift and fall of breathing. Desperately afraid, Horace put out a finger and touched her temple. A pulse beat slowly beneath his pressure.

With its stem torn away, the surfboat floated at the mercy of the flood. Another pound might sink it. Treading water, Bradlaw fought a claspknife loose from the clinging hold of his pocket and leaning gingerly over the gunwale, sawed at Mary Lou's bonds until they parted. He must repeat the process from the other side to free her ankles. Anger surged through him as he saw the welts of the gouging ropes, the soft lips bruised by the gag. Gladly he would have drowned Modorgoff again.

Moving with infinite care, lest he upset the boat's precarious balance, Horace lifted Mary Lou upon the thwart, her legs first. Then churning water furiously to gain altitude, he slipped his hands under the girl's shoulders and raised her slender body until she lay stretched across the boat.

Mary Lou breathed easier through her freed mouth, her eyelids fluttered but she did not regain consciousness. Under her dripping curls, Bradlaw's probing fingers found an egg-shaped lump of concussion, where she had

been thrown against the seat. In a breathless moment while his heart stood still, he parted the girl's lips, swept the brown hair from her ears, searching for the fresh blood of skull fracture. In relief he went limp and floated beside the boat, regaining strength.

The boat was far out in midstream, opposite the lower end of the stony beach. Horace could not hope to land there; the still strong shoreside current would sweep the unwieldy craft toward the cliff again. He could only angle across the tide, let it carry him upstream, then cut into the current and drift down upon the pier. If his strength held out—Tying the stern painter to his belt, Bradlaw set out to tow the boat.

Seth Moffitt stood at the end of the pier, rope in hand, booted feet braced, tense as he made his longest throw. He whirled the loop above his head with all the strength of his iron arm, for it must carry the weight of two lariats, taken from Modorgoff's gear room and spliced end to end.

The surfboat reached its nearest point. Moffitt's throw was true. The long rope snaked out low over the water; the small loop ran out to the end of its string, stood up, then dropped over Bradlaw's upraised arm. Horace tied the lariat to the painter and moved aside.

"Pull her in!" he called. His voice was a croak.

Dully Bradlaw watched the surfboat slide smoothly and swiftly to safety. He was abysmally tired. It was all he could do to make the pier. As Dutcher gave him a hand to climb the stringpiece, unconsciousness swept over him like a tidal wave.

He came to in the late afternoon. The

Russian horses and Mary Lou's roan mare waited saddled on the pier. Mary Lou herself knelt beside him, towed but fresh with the resilience of youth.

"If you're goin' to scare me so, Horace, faintin'," Mary Lou said, "I'll have to superintend your swimmin'."

There was a plethora of horseflesh for the ride home. After a tortuous, switchback trail across the ridge, the men changed to their own mounts. All but Horace. Moffitt returned from a gallop along the crest leading the black stallion. He put the reins in Bradlaw's hand.

"Lije would want you to have Dixie," he said simply.

The great beast put its head down, ears forward, sniffing its new master. Horace laid a hesitant hand on Dixie's formidable muzzle. The stallion nickered rumblingly.

"Looks like you're one of the family, Bradlaw," Dutcher said, grinning.

Mary Lou blushed and found urgent need to reknit a cinch strap.

Under the aged black oak before Dutcher's store, Bradlaw halted Dixie and held out his hand.

"You're not goin' East?" Mary Lou cried in alarm. No imagination was needed to note her sudden pallor.

"Only to Eureka," Horace answered. "The Coast Guard must be told of that Russian pirate ship."

In the county seat Bradlaw had a second important errand. He accosted the proprietor of the Leather Emporium.

"If you've one I can take back to Mattole today," he said, "I'm interested in a girl-size Mexican saddle, full-stamped and silver-trimmed, with stirrup hoods big enough to hold a bear cub."



Free - for - All

"**S**HADOW ON THE TRAIL," the Zane Grey novel presented in this magazine-abridgment form in this issue of ZGWM, germinated in the author's speculations as to the unknown fates of such outlaws as Frank Jackson, member of Sam Bass's gang and the lone survivor when that gang ran into a lawman trap in Round Rock. Jackson made his escape through a hail of lead, disappeared, and was never traced, though the Rangers never gave up hunting him. In his foreword to the book version of "Shadow on the Trail," author Grey speculates as to what might have become of Jackson and of other outlaws like him who seemed to vanish into thin air. "It is conceivable," he writes, "that some of them reformed and lived useful hidden, perhaps remorseful, lives in out of the way corners of the vast West." From this wondering concern eventually

grew the moving story of Wade Holden, the gunman hero of "Shadow on the Trail."

Stories by Giff Cheshire have appeared fairly infrequently in ZGWM—only four times, in fact, including the present one. Each time, however, they have shown evidence of steady improvement in craftsmanship, with greater discipline and more effective control of his story elements. Now with "Strangers in the Evening," he has given us a story which we feel has well earned a Zane Grey Western Award. It is an honest, thoughtful, and tensely exciting tale—the kind that will stick in your mind and heart.

Cheshire is a native Oregonian, born in the Willamette Valley forty-odd years ago. Pioneer parents who crossed the plain in '52 by covered wagon helped to furnish background for his

Western stories. He, his wife, and two children live in a suburb of Portland.

In "T. J. and the Eating Indian," Clark Gray has recounted another of the tall stories which his salty old fictional hero, ranchman T. J. McDowell, loves to spin. Author Gray was himself born and reared in the Osage country of Oklahoma, pretty much the same type of blackjack ranchland where T. J. lives. The first story Gray ever sold featured an old Indian character based on a real-life Osage called John Stink, who though he left an estate of \$80,000 when he died, refused to make any concessions to the white man's civilization, other than to live in a frame house in winter and smoke big black cigars. Gray, a two hundred-pounder who wears a crew haircut and spectacles, says he "attempted to get an education" at M.I.T., Oklahoma A. & M., the University of Oklahoma, the University of Heidelberg, and in the U. S. Army Air Force. At present he has a small ranch south of Pawhuska and "a small family, consisting of a wife, a son, two dogs, a horse, and a garden tractor."

Walt Sheldon is a young writer who likes best to turn out historical-Westerns. "Desert Parley," his first ZGWM story, shows how well he handles this type of yarn, and we're hoping he'll do some more of 'em for you eventually.

John E. Kelly has given ZGWM readers many fine yarns of the Old West, but "Oil at Mattole River" makes a strong bid for top place among them all. This colorful, exciting tale has a solid historical basis. Says John: "In 1864 oil was discovered in the Mattole River valley, Humboldt County, near Cape Mendocino, California. This was the first commercial find west of Pennsylvania, and a boom developed, with concomitant conflict. The Civil War was under way, and while Humboldt County had gone for Douglas in the election of 1860 and was prevailingly Unionist in sentiment, the settlers of Mattole Valley, largely recent immigrants from Georgia and the Carolinas, had voted overwhelmingly for Breckinridge, the secessionist candidate. While quiescent, the majority were Confederate sympathizers. The country was sparsely settled and the authority of the federal government was rather theoretical.

"When the discovery of oil became known 'outside,' adventurers and capital poured in. Among the newcomers was the agent of a Russian-American company, with headquarters in St. Petersburg and the then colossal capital of ten million dollars. This company claimed the entire coast south of Cape Mendocino under a grant supposedly made by the Czar during the short

Russian stay at Fort Ross. Since the Czar almost alone among European powers supported the North, to the extent of sending Russian fleets to New York and San Francisco to warn Britain and France against pro-Southern intervention, the Russian company was able to enlist powerful support, while the pro-Southern settlers of Mattole Valley were in Washington's bad graces. The Union Secretary of the Interior sent a representative to inspect the wells, and I have made this agent the principal actor in the tale. With the exception of Jack Davis, on whose ranch the first find was made, characters are fictional. The Russian agent, called 'Modorgoff' in the story, was named Muldrov in actuality.

"The oil boom collapsed in 1866, due to faulty land titles and the failure of primitive well casings. In 1867, when

public sentiment had veered away from Russia over the Alaskan purchase, the Russian company's claim, shadowy at best, was outlawed on the ground that registration had not been effected at San Francisco by a certain date."

"Hard Times Behind Them" is the account of the way in which two of the most famous of all the mountain men recouped their fortunes when the shifting tide of fashion ruined their livelihood. We presume that in telling this unmoral little chronicle factster W. H. Hutchinson is not presenting their foray as a shining example of the value of free-enterprise!

Dan Muller's hardcase two-gun man, one of the Cross-Up boss's infrequent front covers, is clearly an individual better met on the newsstand than on a lonely trail at dusk.





INDIAN POLICEMAN

IN DAYS PAST, when the wards of the Great White Father got out of line, it was the duty of the reservation Indian agent to send his native policemen after the renegades. It took an Indian to catch an Indian! Knowing the rugged country, he also instinctively knew where a hunted brave would head for and, thinking as only an Indian would, the copper-skinned officer had the advantage of being able to anticipate the next play. It was a group of such Indian policemen, led by Lieutenant Bullhead, who went to arrest old Sitting Bull, the wily Sioux chieftain on December 15, 1890. In a pre-dawn surprise move at Standing Rock Agency, Sitting Bull was seized, but he and his sons, Crow Foot and Little Assiniboin, along with eight of their followers, went down fighting, resisting the white man's law to the last. Four of the Indian police also broke trail for the Happy Hunting Grounds, and others were badly shot up.

To this day, the Indian policeman's job is more or less the equivalent of falling into a bed of cactus!

DAN MULLER

In This Issue

SHADOW ON THE TRAIL by Zane Grey (abridgment)

A hard-hitting, fast-moving saga of range war and violence. Wade Holden, ace gunman of the Southwest's most notorious gang of train robbers and hold-up men escapes as the Texas Rangers close in to write "finish" to his last desperate stand. Eluding pursuit, he plunges away into a life of endless hiding and distasteful make-believe. After long years of lone-wolf wanderings, he makes a spectacular come-back on the side of justice, as "Tex Brandon" and devotes his guns to helping the Pencarrows, who had befriended him, in many savage battles, until finally peace comes to the rangeland and he claims a rich reward—the love of beautiful Jacqueline Pencarrow.

OIL AT MATTOLE RIVER by John E. Kelly

A colourful, exciting novelette. Horace Bradlaw, special agent, runs smack into the middle of trouble when his oil-hunting assignment meets opposition in California's hotly disputed Mattole Valley.

STRANGERS IN THE EVENING by Giff Cheshire

A fine tale of a man and what he believes. Marlow's ideal is one of self-sufficiency, but sometimes you need help to achieve that.

DESERT PARLEY by Walt Sheldon

A story of direct and striking impact. Peace or war hangs in the balance as Sergeant Train and Silver Knife, Navajo blood brothers, meet in personal combat.

—plus many other exciting and stirring tales and features of the American West.

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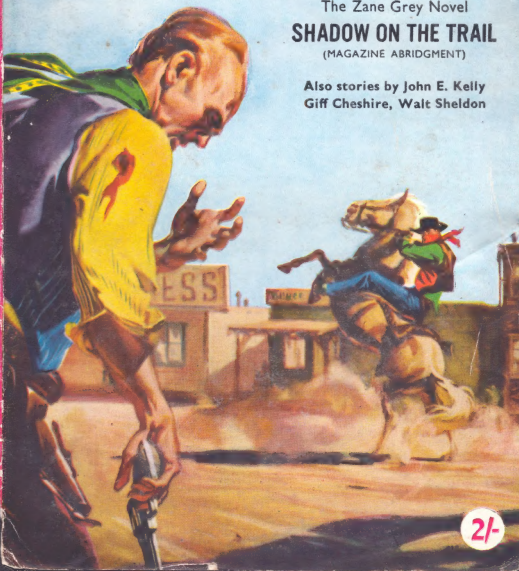


ZANE GREY'S WESTERN

MAGAZINE

The Zane Grey Novel
SHADOW ON THE TRAIL
(MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

Also stories by John E. Kelly
Giff Cheshire, Walt Sheldon



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